



A NOVEL OF
OBSESSION,
MURDER, AND
POLITICS

THE
FOLDING
KNIFE

K. J. PARKER

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By K. J. Parker

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The Belly of the Bow

The Proof House

THE SCAVENGER TRILOGY

Shadow

Pattern

Memory

THE ENGINEER TRILOGY

Devices and Desires

Evil for Evil

The Escapement

The Company

The Folding Knife

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Orbit

Hachette Book Group

237 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10017

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First eBook Edition: February 2010

ISBN: 978-0-316-07210-6

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For Jonathan Katz

*“His life is gentle, and the elements
So mixed in him that nature might stand up
And say to all the world, ‘This is a man’ ”*

Forty Years Later

A man is sitting on the roof of a coach, crawling through a dusty plain. He wears an expensive coat, dirty and stained, and ruined good shoes. Next to him, avoiding conversation, sit a liveried porter, an armed man and a gloomy individual in a faintly comic footman's outfit. In front of them there's an impressive pile of luggage, trunks and cases and chests, secured to the rail with strong rope. The coach rolls over a stone and all four men sway precariously.

The man in the dirty coat looks down at his fingers, notices a hangnail, drops his right hand into his pocket and fishes out a beautiful gold-handled folding knife. He finds it awkward to open; there's something wrong with his left hand, the fingers are stiff and it doesn't work properly. He trims the nail, but then the coach hits another stone and lurches wildly. The folding knife flips out of the man's hand. He makes a wild attempt to catch it as it falls, gets two fingers on it, fumbles the catch. The knife slips out of his grasp, hits the rail, bounces off and flies over the edge of the roof.

The man stares for a moment at where the knife suddenly isn't. Then he shouts, "Stop the coach."

Nobody reacts.

"I said, stop the damn coach," the man shouts. Nobody reacts.

The man scrambles up, sways with the motion of the coach, forfeits his balance and lands ingloriously on his backside. The armed man, some kind of guard, grins at him.

The man looks over his shoulder. By now, the coach has moved on some thirty or forty yards; even if he hurls himself off the roof without

breaking his leg or his neck, his chances of finding the knife are too slim. It's gone, and that's that. Also, he recognises and concedes that he's not the man he once was. Until very recently, any order he chose to give would have been obeyed without question; now, nobody even hears him. The folding knife has gone, as quickly, suddenly and irrecoverably as someone dying.

The man—if any of his three companions on the roof had thought to ask him his name, he'd have lied to them—closes his eyes. As soon as he does so, a moment from the past fills his mind. It always does, the same image, the same moment, every time his eyes close. Twenty years.

He sees a bed, in a well-furnished room. On the floor beside it lies a naked man, face down, holding a fancy costume dagger. His throat has been cut. On the bed there's the body of a woman, and her throat's been cut too, but she lies face upwards; her lips are still moving, but her eyes are just taking on that cold, hard look. If a speck of dust were to land on them, or a fly, they wouldn't blink. He sees her through a red blur, because the blood from her jugular vein spurted in his face. In his right hand he feels the handle of the folding knife.

(Always the same, always there. By now, surely, it should be familiar enough to be invisible. Once, when he was extremely rich, he'd bought a painting by one of the great masters. He'd hung it on the wall opposite his bed, so it'd be the first thing he saw when he woke up. A man could never get tired of looking at this picture, they reckoned. In its perfectly inclusive lines, its total sublimation of symmetry and asymmetry, it contained every possibility in the world. After a week, he stopped noticing it was there. A month later, he sold it, made a profit, and had a mirror put in its place, as a form of punishment.)

The woman's lips stop moving, part-way through an unvoiced word, and then she just falls sideways, like a piece of furniture carelessly knocked over. Her head cracks against the leg of the bed, making a wooden sound, like a stick hitting a ball.

He hears his name spoken; not his name, a word equally familiar, amounting to the same thing. Oh, he thinks, and turns round. Twin boys, about seven years old, stand in the doorway, looking at him.

“Daddy?”

For some reason, he folds up the knife and puts it back in his pocket.
“Go to your room,” he says. “Now.”

Neither of them moves. They stare at him, and it occurs to him that the look on their faces must be very much like the look on his own, when he’d first entered the room.

(Still there, he thinks, and still the same; interesting. Surely, by now, that should have been the least of my problems.)

He opens his eyes.

One

On the morning of the day when Basso (Bassianus Severus, the future First Citizen) was born, his mother woke up to find a strange woman sitting at the foot of her bed.

Her husband was away somewhere on business, and the servants slept downstairs. The woman was dirty and shabby, and she was holding a small knife.

“Hello,” Basso’s mother said. “What do you want?”

Over the woman’s shoulder, Basso’s mother could see that the skylight had been forced. She was shocked. It had never occurred to her that a woman could climb a drainpipe.

“Money,” the woman said.

Basso’s mother assessed her. About her own age, though she looked much older; a foreigner, most likely a Mavortine (blonde hair, short, fat nose, blue eyes); there were always Mavortines in the city at that time of year, seasonal workers. She was wearing the remains of a man’s coat, several sizes too big.

“I’m terribly sorry,” Basso’s mother said, “but I don’t have any. My husband doesn’t let me have money. He does all the...”

The woman made a strange grunting noise; frustration and annoyance, all that work for nothing. “I’m sorry,” Basso’s mother repeated. “If I had any money, I’d give it to you.” She paused, then added, “You look like you could use it.”

The woman scowled at her. “What about downstairs?”

Basso's mother shook her head sadly. "All the money in the house is kept in my husband's iron chest," she said. "It's got seven padlocks, and he carries the keys about with him. The servants might have a few coppers," she added helpfully, "but it's nearly the end of the month, so I doubt it."

The woman was holding the knife rather than brandishing it. Basso's mother guessed she'd used it to work open the skylight catch. It was a folding knife, an expensive item, with a slim blade and a gold handle; the sort of thing a prosperous clerk would own, for sharpening pens.

"If you're that hard up," Basso's mother said, "you could sell your knife. It must be worth a bit."

The woman looked at it, then back at her. "Can't," she said. "If I went in a shop, they'd know it was stolen. I'd be arrested." She gasped, then burst into a noisy coughing fit that lasted several seconds.

Basso's mother nodded. "So jewellery wouldn't be much use to you either," she said. She was feeling sick, but managed to keep her face straight and calm. "All I can suggest is that you help yourself to some decent clothes. The dressing room's next door, just there, look."

The woman was looking at her, considering the tactical implications. "Shoes," she said.

Basso's mother wasn't able to see the woman's feet. "Oh, I've got plenty of shoes," she said. "I think a pair of good stout walking shoes would be the most useful thing, don't you?"

The woman started to reply, then broke out coughing again. Basso's mother waited till she'd finished, then said, "I'm sorry about the money, but at least let me get you something for that cough. How long have you had it?"

The woman didn't answer, but there was an interested look in her eyes. Medicine clearly didn't feature in her life. Basso's mother pushed back the sheets and carefully levered herself out of bed and onto her feet. She didn't bother putting her slippers on.

"Rosehip syrup, I think," she said, waddling across the room to the table where her apothecary chest stood. She took the key from the little lacquered box and opened the chest. "There's a jug of water on the stand beside the bed. Would you mind?"

The woman hesitated, then brought the jug. Her feet were bare, red, nearly purple; quite disgusting. "While I'm fixing this, have a look in the

shoe closet. It's just there, look, on your left."

Not that the woman would be able to read the labels on the bottles. Basso's mother poured a little dark brown syrup into a glass and added water. "Here," she said, "drink this."

The woman had already pulled out two pairs of boots; she was clutching them, pinched together, in her left hand. The knife was still in her right. She hesitated, then threw the boots on the bed and took the glass.

"When you've drunk that," Basso's mother said, "I'll ring for some food. When did you last have anything to eat?"

The woman was staring at her, a stupid look on her face. Basso's mother counted under her breath. On five, the woman staggered; on seven, she flopped down on the floor. Usually it was at least ten before it had any effect at all.

Later, Basso's mother decided she must have given her too much (understandable, in the circumstances). Also, the woman may have had a weak heart or some similar condition. It was sad, of course, but just one of those things. Basso's mother paid for a coffin and a plot in the public cemetery. It was, she felt, the least she could do.

Whether the shock induced early labour the doctors couldn't say. In the event, there were no complications and the baby was perfectly healthy, though a little underweight. Basso's father had bars fitted over the skylight. A better catch would have done just as well, but he was that sort of man. Basso's mother tried not to notice the bars, but they were always there in her mind after that.

The woman must have dropped the folding knife when she fell over, and knocked it under the bed. A maid found it and put it away in a drawer. Basso's mother came across it some time later and decided to keep it; not quite a trophy, but not something you just throw away. Besides, it was very good quality. When Basso was ten years old she gave it to him. He knew the story that went with it, of course.

Back home his name was seven syllables long, but here, in the army of the Vesani Republic, he was Aelius of the Seventeenth Auxiliary, the youngest captain in the service, kicking his heels in barracks in the City when men with half his ability were shipping out to the war in charge of a battalion.

He was checking supply requisitions in his office when a flustered-looking sergeant interrupted him.

“We’ve arrested a boy, captain,” the sergeant said.

Aelius looked up. “And?” he said.

“He beat up a sentry.”

The culture of the service demanded that enlisted men addressed officers as rarely and as briefly as possible. Aelius thought it was a stupid rule, but he observed it rigorously. “You’d better bring him in,” he said.

A boy, sure enough. Fourteen rather than fifteen, Aelius decided, mostly on the evidence of the face; on the tall side for his age, but still only a kid. “And this child assaulted a sentry?”

The sergeant nodded. “Broken arm, broken jaw, two cracked ribs and knocked out a couple of teeth, sir. Unprovoked attack. Two witnesses.”

The boy didn’t seem to have a mark on him. Correction: skinned knuckles on his left hand. “This boy attacked a grown man for no apparent reason and broke his jaw,” Aelius said. The boy was looking past him, at the far wall. “Well?” he barked. The boy said nothing. “I’m talking to you.”

The boy shrugged. “I hit that man, if that’s what you mean.”

Aelius nodded slowly. “Why?”

“He spoke to my sister.”

“And?”

The boy frowned. “He made a lewd suggestion.”

Aelius managed to keep a straight face. “So you beat him up.”

“Yes.”

Aelius looked sideways at the floor. Bringing charges was out of the question. A soldier of the Seventeenth beaten to a jelly by a child; they’d never live it down. The face was vaguely familiar. Not a pleasant sight: his nose was a little concave stub, and his enormous lower lip curled up over his upper lip, smothering it. “What’s your name?”

“Arcadius Severus.”

That made Aelius frown. The boy wasn’t dressed like a gentleman’s son, but he had a formal name. The voice was completely nondescript, and Aelius hadn’t been in the Republic long enough to distinguish the subtleties of class from a man’s accent. Harder still with a boy with a tendency to mumble. “That’s a big name for a kid,” he said. “Who’s your father?”

The boy felt in his pocket, produced a copper penny and held it out on his palm, heads upwards. “*He* is.”

No wonder the face was familiar. “Sergeant,” Aelius said, “get out.”

As the door closed, Aelius leaned forward across his desk. The boy was watching him, to see what would happen next. He wasn’t afraid, he wasn’t smug. That alone was enough to confirm that he was who he said he was. “What kind of lewd suggestion?” Aelius asked.

“None of your business.”

Aelius shrugged. “Fine,” he said. “All right, you can go.”

The boy turned towards the door, and Aelius rose smoothly to his feet, snatched his swagger stick off the desk and slammed it against the side of the boy’s head, hitting him just above the left ear. He went down, started to get up, staggered, recovered and got to his feet.

“Can I go now?” the boy said.

Aelius nodded. “I think that makes us all square,” he said. “Do you agree?”

“Yes,” the boy said. “Yes, that’s fair.”

Fair, Aelius thought. Not the word he’d have chosen, but surprisingly appropriate. “Then go home,” he said. “And maybe you’d like to think about the relationship between the military and the civil authorities. Ask your dad; he’ll explain it to you.”

Outside, the boy’s sister was waiting for him. She was flanked by two sentries; not physically restrained, but held in place like a chess piece that can’t move without being taken. “It’s all right,” the boy said. “They let me go.”

She said something to him as they walked away. He couldn’t make out the words—his ears were still ringing from the blow on the head—but he didn’t really need to. His sister wasn’t happy at all.

“You won’t tell Father,” he said.

She scowled, then shook her head. “I ought to.”

“I settled it with the captain,” the boy replied. “You’ll only make trouble.”

She made a tutting noise, like a mother reproving an infant. “They’ll know something’s happened when they see you like that,” she said.

“I fell out of a tree.”

Scornful look. “Since when did you climb trees?”

He grinned at her. "That's why I fell," he said. "Lack of experience."

"I'm sick of covering up for you," she said, walking a little faster. It cost her disproportionate effort, because she would wear those ridiculous shoes. "I'm always having to lie for you, and I've had enough. Next time..."

"Oh, that's wonderful," the boy said. "It was all your fault anyway. If you hadn't been making eyes at that soldier..."

(Which he knew was a lie; but a lie he could pretend to believe, thereby putting her on the defensive.)

"That's just rubbish," she snapped. "And you're stupid. I've got a good mind to tell Father what happened. It'd serve you right if I did."

She didn't, of course. As it turned out, there was no need for anybody to say anything. The First Citizen and his wife were out for the evening at a reception, and off early the next morning for the state opening of the Assembly. Undoubtedly the servants noticed his scabbed knuckles, and when the ringing in his ears didn't go away, they quickly learned to talk to his right side or speak a little louder. He had no trouble hearing his father, because the First Citizen's voice was plenty loud enough, even at home, and his mother never had anything much to say for herself at the best of times.

* * *

Six months later, the boy's father lost the election and was replaced as First Citizen by Didius Vetrano, whose father had been a sausage-maker. That is to say, Didius Maesus had owned a twenty per cent stake in a slaughterhouse where they made the best-quality air-dried sausage for the export trade, along with a large number of other sound investments. As far as the boy's father was concerned, that made him a sausage-maker. He sulked for a month, then bought a ship—ridiculously cheap, he told anybody who'd listen, the most incredible bargain—and cheered up again. His good mood lasted five weeks, until the ship sank in the Strait of Essedine with a full cargo of pepper and saffron.

"Fucking disaster," the boy overheard his father telling one of his business associates (a small, dried man with hollow cheeks and a very sharp nose). "Eight hundred thousand, and that's without what that bastard gouged me out of for the ship."

The little man frowned. "Borrowed?"

"Six hundred thousand." The boy's father sighed. "Unsecured, which is a blessing, I suppose, but it puts me where I squelch when I walk. Bastard had no business selling a ship that wasn't seaworthy."

The little man thought for a moment. He was a study for a major sculpture, *Man Thinking*. "You need capital," he said.

"Yes, thank you, that had in fact occurred to me already." The boy's father took a peach off the top of the fruit dish, bit off a third and discarded the rest. "You wouldn't happen to..."

"No."

A slight shrug; no harm in trying. "Looks like marriage, then," he said. "That or mortgage the vineyard, and I'd be reluctant to do that."

The little man nodded. "Which one?"

"Oh, the boy," the boy's father said. "I've already done a deal for the girl, but it's a long-term job, I'd hate to spoil it by rushing it along. The good thing about children," he went on, "is that when you run out you can always make some more. Friend of mine used to say, a man of good family carries his pension between his legs. No, I had an offer for the boy only last month, but of course I was flush then and told them to stuff it."

"Good offer?"

The boy's father leaned back in his chair and let his head droop forward. "It'd be enough to see me out of this mess, and a bit left over, but that's about it. On the other hand, it'd be cash up front on betrothal, with the real estate settled till he comes of age. I could borrow against the realty, invest it, pick a winner, clear off my debts with the profit and break off the betrothal. It's a thought," he added defensively, though the little man hadn't said anything. "No, I suppose not. I have an idea my luck's not at its best and brightest right now."

The little man folded his hands in his lap. "None of this would've happened if you'd insured the ship," he said.

"Yes, well."

But the little man was like a little dog that gets its teeth in something and won't let go. "How much have you got left, Palo?"

A long sigh; and the boy saw that look on his father's face, the one that meant he was about to answer quietly. "Not enough," he said. "Oh, I've got assets to show for it, land and good securities, but either they're tied up or

they're long-term. Like the brickyard," he said, rubbing the sides of his nose with both forefingers, like a man just waking up. "I've put a lot of money into that. Fifteen years' time it'll be a gold mine, but if I sold it now I'd be screwed. Actual ready cash..." He shook his head. "Hence the short-term unsecured loans, which are eating me alive, of course. And I spent a lot of money on the election, of course, and that was a joke. Beaten by a sausage-maker, very funny, ha ha. Makes you wonder why you ever bother in the first place."

The little man coughed, a strange noise, a bit like a bone breaking. "I never could see the point in running for office," he said. "I've always had better things to do with my time. People talk about the contacts and the influence, but I don't see it myself. Personally, I prefer to concentrate my energies on business."

The boy's father grinned. "With hindsight, I tend to agree with you. Still, your circumstances are a bit different. You could always afford the best senators money could buy."

A very slight shrug, to concede an inconsequential point. "The offer for your son."

"Quite." (The boy shifted to ease the cramp in his leg and banged his foot against the leg of a table. Fortunately, neither man heard.) "Malo Sinvestri's daughter. Could be worse."

"The Licinii have done very well in bulk grain," the little man said. "You have those warehouses down by the weir standing empty. Presumably your intention—"

"Actually, I hadn't thought of that." A suddenly-cheering-up lilt in his father's voice. "Thanks, Galba, that puts quite a nice edge on the deal. Of course, I'd have to use proxies."

"Licinius doesn't know?"

"Why should he?" A short laugh, like a hammer on an anvil, or a bell. "Not in my name, you see, so not on the register. It'd be worth it just to see the look on Malo's face."

On the day of the betrothal ceremony, he wasn't well. He had an upset stomach, ferocious stabbing pains between his navel and his groin that made him twist like a dancer.

His mother didn't appear to believe him. "Don't be stupid," she said. "This is a serious occasion. It's not something you can get out of by pretending you're ill."

He couldn't answer immediately. When he'd got the use of his mouth back, he said, "Tell you what, you can come and inspect the contents of my chamber pot. Will that do you?"

"Don't be—"

"That's evidence," he said. "Solid proof. Well, maybe not solid. For pity's sake, mother, I'm not *well*. I can hardly stand upright."

His mother's look held the unique alloy of pity and contempt she reserved just for him. "Well, you've nobody but yourself to blame," she said, dipping her hand into the linen pocket she wore on her belt and taking out nine plum stones. "You don't even *like* plums," she said.

He nodded. His mistake had been throwing the stones out of the window, instead of burying them in the midden. Attention to detail. "Oh, I like them," he said, "but they don't like me." A particularly sharp spasm put him out of action for a while, and then he said, "It doesn't alter the fact that I'm not well enough to stand through a long formal ceremony. Unless you want me to make a spectacle of myself in front of all those people."

His mother shook her head. "I haven't told your father about these," she said, moving the plum stones a little closer to his nose. "You don't have to go to the ceremony, I'll send a note to say you're ill, but I'll tell your father the truth. It's entirely up to you."

He breathed in deeply. "All right," he said. "What do you suggest?"

She nodded briskly. "I'll get you some medicine," she said.

Her words coincided with yet another spasm, so the face he pulled was submerged in a greater reaction. His mother collected medicines, rather in the way a boy collects coins or seals or arrowheads; one or two genuine pieces, along with a whole load of junk. "Thanks," he said, "but I think I'll be—"

"Stay there," she said, and a few minutes later she came back with a little blue-glass cup. "Drink this," she said, "it'll get you through the ceremony."

The last attack had left him gasping for air. "Does it work?"

"I don't know," his mother replied, "I've never tried it myself. The man said it's a miracle cure, but I've never dealt with him before. You don't

have to take it if you don't want to."

He took the cup and stared into it; off-white sludge, like the scum on top of new cream. "What is it?"

"The man said it's a special sort of clay dust," his mother answered blandly. "Apparently there's a magic mountain in Sigaea, which is the only place in the world this stuff's ever been found. It's mined by an ancient order of monks exclusively for the Imperial court, but somehow this man managed to get hold of a jar." She shrugged. "You never know," she said. "Anyway, drink it if you like. It might do you good."

Remarkably, it did. At least, it stopped up his bowels like a cork for three days. It didn't do anything for the pain, but he handled that himself, and if any of the guests at the betrothal noticed anything, they didn't mention it. In a way, he was almost glad of it, since it gave him something else to think about apart from the bride and her family. The latter would have scared the life out of him if he'd been in any fit state to care; several huge men, tall, broad and fat, with close-cropped beards that came up to the tops of their cheekbones, and tall thin women who looked at him and shuddered. His father was extremely subdued, which was unnerving, and sober, which was unprecedented. He couldn't see his mother most of the time, because she had to sit on the far side of the temple with his sister and the other women, but he could feel her eyes on him like a bridle. As for the bride, she was muffled up in veils like a beekeeper (what's the matter, he thought, is she afraid I'm going to sting her to death or something?) so she registered with him as little more than a shape in a gauze mist and a small, sullen voice that mumbled the words after the priest. But when she first saw him, she stopped dead in her tracks, the way a horse stops when it sees something it doesn't like, and no amount of booting and spurring will get it to shift. Her father and uncle whispered something to her, "what do you think you're playing at?" or words to that effect; she whispered back, and then her father put his hand between her shoulder blades and shoved so hard she nearly fell over. An auspicious start, he couldn't help thinking; not that he blamed her in the least. He owned a mirror. It was a small comfort to know there was someone who was even more wretched about the performance than he was, but the pain in his stomach was the only thing he could think about.

The priest got his name the wrong way round: Bassianus Severus Arcadius. On the way home, he asked if it was still legal. His father assured him that it was.

His cousin Renno came up from the country. On balance, he liked Renno. He was easy to talk to, usually had money and was handy in a fight. Since he'd last seen him, Renno had grown, and the dark fuzz on his top lip had pretensions of coherence.

"You got married, then," Renno said.

He sighed. "Hardly," he replied. "That doesn't happen for another four years."

"Something to look forward to, then." Renno hopped up onto the gate and sat swinging his legs. His feet nearly touched the ground now. "You're lucky," he said.

"Am I?"

"Are you kidding?"

The boy scowled. "I never actually got to see what she looks like."

Renno laughed. "Is that right? Well, the first thing you notice is the moustache."

He didn't look round. "You know her, then?"

"Met her, a couple of times."

"And?"

Renno yawned and stretched, wobbled a bit and sat up straight. "Let's see," he said. "Nice boobs, good arse, a bit top-heavy but she could still grow out of that. In four years, she could be all right."

The boy shrugged. "What's she like?"

"I just told you."

"Apart from that."

"Let's walk into town and get some fruit. No disrespect to your family, but the food around here's a bit bloody sparse."

The boy nodded. "You got any money?"

"Sure."

There was a wicket gate in the back wall of the kitchen garden, put there to make it easier for the gardeners to carry manure from the stables without having to go through the main courtyard. From the stables you could climb

out over the tack-room roof and drop down in the snicket that led to the alley that joined up with the public road, and nobody would know. "I don't know anything about her," the boy said, "or the family, come to that."

"You haven't missed much," Renno replied. "Loaded, but quite new. I think they're in bulk grain."

"I know," the boy replied. Renno said something, but he was on the boy's wrong side and he didn't quite catch it. "Say again?"

Renno frowned. "I said, the eldest son's in the Navy, that's all. Are you having trouble hearing me? That's the fourth time."

"Left side," the boy said. "I got a bang on the head a while back and I can't hear much with my left ear."

"You should get that seen to."

"It'll clear up," the boy replied. "You don't go telling anybody if you're not feeling so good in this house."

Renno grinned. "Your mum still into the witchcraft stuff?"

"It's a pain," the boy said sadly. "Of course, she never uses any of it herself, just tries it out on other people. One of the maids nearly died. You can see why I keep quiet about my ear."

"Better deaf than dead," Renno agreed solemnly. "What happened?"

The boy looked past him. "Someone got me when I wasn't looking. No big deal."

"Bastard," Renno sympathised. "It'll probably just clear up. A friend of my dad's went deaf for a year after he fell off his horse, but it sorted itself out eventually."

They walked out of the alley gate into the street. The grain carts had made the early morning delivery and were heading back out of town, a long procession, like a funeral. "You didn't answer my question," the boy said.

"I don't know, do I?" Renno sounded a bit edgy. "Like I told you, only met the girl twice, once at a wedding and once at some religious thing. Apart from the obvious, I didn't pay much attention."

"You lot know her lot, then."

"Vaguely. Also, we're sort of neighbours. They've got a place just over the hill from our place at Sesunto. They call it a hunting lodge, but it's just a shack, really. They don't go there much."

"And?"

When Renno shrugged, there was a suggestion of trying to shake off an annoying entanglement. "And nothing," he said. "I told you all I know."

"No you didn't," the boy said.

"Fine." Renno sighed. "Apparently, she can be a bit of a handful."

The boy nodded. "What does that mean?"

"There was some bother with a young footman," Renno said. "And a boy from the village. All taken care of, naturally, and no harm done. There, satisfied?"

"Marvellous," the boy replied, and he thought of the ship his father had bought. For a man who'd been First Citizen, he didn't have much sense.

"You've really cheered me up, you know that?"

"You asked," Renno replied. "And anyway, she'll grow out of it. They usually do. Like Trusca."

The boy smiled. Renno's sister had given the family a lot to think about at one time, but now she was safely married and no bother to anyone.

"How's she doing, by the way?"

"Pregnant again," Renno said. "Obviously he keeps her busy, which is presumably the answer in these cases. Won't be long before they've got enough for their own hockey team."

The boy nodded. "They could play the Sulpicii," he said. "Or the Marciani."

"They should form a league," Renno said. "That'd be quite good, actually. Each year, the winners could play the army."

Renno bought four apples; a waste of money, since it was the season, and there were better examples of a better variety hanging from the branches in the orchard. They sat down in the shade of the Bank portico.

"Here," Renno said.

"No thanks," the boy replied. He was very fond of apples and it was three hours since breakfast.

"What?" Renno looked at him. "What did you let me buy this many for, then?"

"Have the rest later," the boy replied.

"Suit yourself." Renno bit deep, and the boy was briefly overwhelmed by the smell of the juice. "Sure you don't want one?" Renno asked with his mouth full.

He ignored the question, and said: "What happened to the footman?"

“Got slung out,” Renno said. “Went back to his village, I suppose. Nothing too bad, I don’t think. Why?”

“No reason.”

“You should definitely see a doctor about your ear,” Renno said. “You look pretty weird, twisting round like that so you can hear what I’m saying.”

“I’m not bothered,” the boy said. “And anyway, doctors need paying.”

“Your dad—”

“Would want to know what happened.” The boy shook his head. “I don’t think he’s noticed, and I’d rather keep it that way.”

Renno looked like he wasn’t sure what to make of that. “Up to you,” he said. “I’d hate being deaf.”

“It’s no fun,” the boy conceded. “But there’s worse things.” Time, he decided, to change the subject. “Did you hear about Gal getting thrown out of the seminary?”

“I didn’t think it was possible to get thrown out of there. Not if you’re loaded like the Valerii.”

“It can’t have been easy,” the boy said. “But you know how resourceful Gal can be. He set fire to the day chapel.”

Renno nodded. “Actually, that’s not bad.”

“During morning confession.”

When Renno was really amused by something, he had this knack of silent laughing; his mouth opened in an enormous grin, but no sound came out. “Well,” he said. “That would probably do it, yes.”

The boy looked down at his hands. “Best part is, it was the day after his uncle Naso got made Patriarch.”

Renno breathed in deeply, the sign of great happiness. “There are times when I think there might still be hope for our family,” he said.

“I don’t,” the boy said sharply, and got to his feet. “Still, who cares about that? Let’s go down to the fencing school and see if we can steal someone’s coat.”

They succeeded, and in the pocket they found a purse containing twelve gold eagles and a considerable sum in provincial silver. They handed it in to the watch, and said they’d found it in the street.

“I bought a bank,” his father said.

The boy stared down into his porridge. He knew why his father had chosen family breakfast to make his announcement. With the children present, he’d be safe from the hellstorm of uncurbed opinion he’d have come in for if he’d confessed his misdeed in private. In front of the children, she could only say, “Oh.” Which she did.

“Best deal I ever made,” his father said, a little bit loud and a little bit fast. He paused, anticipating a request for further information, which didn’t come. Mother was keeping quiet, a truly ominous sign.

Father chewed some bread, and went on, “The Macer brothers. Perfectly sound business, only they came unstuck over a government loan. Well, they called it a loan but really it was state theft; it’s not like they had any choice. You will lend us this money or else. No security, obviously.”

Even Mother had her limits. “Really,” she said. “So you bought a failed bank.”

“It hasn’t failed yet,” Father replied, a little nervously. “Won’t fail, either. All it needs is capital.”

“Ah.” Mother put down her spoon. “Really, that’s a bit like saying all a dead horse needs is bringing back to life. But I’m sure you know what you’re doing.”

Father frowned. Actually, he was winning. He’d goaded Mother into breaking silence in front of the children, which meant that she’d be fighting the battle with both arms tied behind her back. “The government won’t default,” he said. “It’ll just take its own sweet time about paying. In the mean time, the Macers are stuck for liquidity, and I made them an offer. Their bad luck, our opportunity.”

Mother sighed. “How much is the loan?” she said.

The boy and his sister exchanged swift glances. If Mother was prepared to allow actual numbers at the breakfast table, things were bad. “Six million,” Father said. “I gave the Macers a million for the business, so basically...”

Mother turned to her children. “Finish your breakfast and go upstairs,” she said.

For once—the one and only time—Mother was wrong. Father mortgaged everything and raised the money, and shortly afterwards the Treasury repaid the forced loan to the bank, with interest in full, out of the

proceeds of the naval victory at Eupontis. Within eighteen months, the Charity & Social Justice Bank was in better shape than ever, and Severus Maurus, officially listed as the fifth-richest man in the Republic, was thinking seriously about resuming his political career.

“You know what this means,” Basso’s sister said, as they picked figs from the tree behind the house.

He shrugged. “Enlighten me.”

“Your marriage,” she said.

“What about it?”

She stood on tiptoe, grabbed at a high branch, missed and staggered a little. “It’ll be off,” she said. “You just wait.”

He wasn’t quite sure he understood what she was trying to say. “Off?”

“As in cancelled.”

Still not making sense. “It can’t be,” he said. “It’s a legal contract.”

She laughed. “Oh, sure,” she said. “And if Father wants to get out of it, his lawyers’ll see to it in five minutes flat.”

He was curious. “Really? Could they do that?”

“Of course, stupid. Technicalities. Degrees of affiliation, for one thing.”

“What’s—?”

“Consanguinity.” She sighed. “It means you’re not allowed to marry your relations.”

“I know what it means. But we’re not—”

“Oh yes we are,” his sister said firmly. “Generations and generations ago, quite likely, but you can bet we’re related to the Licinii somehow or other, and the lawyers’ll use that to bust up the deal. Or there’s other stuff. Procedural defects. Time limits for registering the betrothal not complied with. It goes without saying they’ll have made some tiny cock-up or other in the formalities. They always do, just in case either side needs to back out later.”

“Oh,” the boy said. A wasp was buzzing round his head. He kept perfectly still. “But why would he want to?”

“You’re kidding, of course,” his sister said. “If Father’s got his heart set on going into politics again, he’s not going to waste his only son on a bunch of nobodies. He’ll need both of us free and clear for sealing big political alliances. Not,” she added cheerfully, “that I’m complaining. I’m bound to do better as a political pawn than if I’d just been an heiress.”

“Right.” Clearly she didn’t know about her own betrothal (a long-term job, his father had called it). He supposed he ought to tell her, at some point. The wasp, meanwhile, was bobbing up and down in the air, two feet from his head. He stuck out his left hand, bracketed the wasp with his thumb and forefinger, allowed for the wasp’s escape attempt and snapped his fingers. He’d judged it well. He crushed the head and thorax without being stung.

“I wish you wouldn’t do that,” his sister said.

“I think it’s pretty impressive.”

“It’s creepy.”

“Suit yourself,” he replied equably. “Next time I’ll let it go and it can sting you.”

“I don’t mind when it’s spiders,” his sister said. “But bees...”

“It was a wasp.” He wiped his fingers on his sleeve. “I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t suppose it matters very much. It’s just, I’d got used to the idea.”

She laughed. “You’ve never even seen her. Not properly.”

“That’s beside the point.” He jumped up, caught hold of a branch and swung himself astride it, then started to pick the upper branches. “It’s different for you,” he said. “It’s your one big chance. For me, really, it’s just something to deal with and get out of the way.”

His sister made a disgusted noise. “Whoever she turns out to be,” she said, “I feel really sorry for her. Your attitude stinks, you know that?”

“I can’t hear you,” he said. He was only six feet or so off the ground, but the perspective was different. He could see over the orchard wall, into the street. It looked different from there. “Look out,” he said, and started dropping figs for her to catch.

She put on a display of offence taken after that, and wouldn’t discuss the matter further; but it preyed on his mind for the rest of the day, and he slept badly. The next morning, he went to see his mother. He found her writing up the accounts in the east day room.

“Whatever gave you that idea?” she said. “Of course the marriage is going ahead. Your father went to see Licinius Strato only the other day, about the settlement trusts.”

He knew about that, as it happened. He’d overheard Father discussing the negotiations with one of his business friends—it was useful that

everybody treated him as though he was stone-deaf, when his right ear was as good as anybody's, maybe even better. At the time he'd wondered why Father was badgering the Licinii into increasing the cash settlement. Even so; for the chairman of the Charity & Social Justice, the sums in question were trivial. Best deal he ever made, he thought, and grinned.

"What's the joke?" his mother said.

"Nothing. Who's Placidia betrothed to?"

He'd caught her off guard, for once. "Nobody. What a thing to say."

"Oh." He shrugged. "Only, I had an idea Father had arranged something, quite some time ago. A long-term job, he called it, and he said it needed careful planning."

As he spoke he realised: she doesn't know. Father hadn't told her. He made a giant effort and kept his face perfectly straight. There'd be an interesting discussion later. He wondered if there'd be any chance of listening in.

"Nonsense," his mother said, but already she'd practically forgotten about him. She was thinking of things to say to her husband. The boy made an excuse and left. On his way down the stairs, he wondered why his father would keep something like that a secret. He always told Mother everything, as soon as it happened, though from time to time he chose a tactically advantageous occasion. Placidia's marriage, though; that made no sense. For one thing, he'd want her advice.

No matter. He crossed the inner courtyard, stopped by the fountain and peered into the bowl. Sometimes visitors threw small coins in there, for luck, and Father had had visitors that morning. Sure enough, there was a coin, right at the bottom, half buried in the silt. He rolled up his sleeve and grabbed it, but it was only a penny—his father's issue, ironically enough, and sadly worn. Most of the detail had gone on the portrait: the eye, the ear, most of the hair. Cheapskates, he thought sadly, and stuffed it in his pocket.

It was, everybody agreed afterwards, an efficient wedding. The bride's family delivered on time, the priest was competent, nobody was obviously drunk or screwed up their lines. Because it took place in the middle of the day—it had originally been scheduled for the evening, but it had to be moved forward to accommodate a crucial business meeting—there was no

torchlit procession through the streets. Instead, they did the whole thing in-house.

One minute he was standing in the temple, alone, nervous and troubled in his digestive organs (no need for plums this time). The next, a strange creature in a white cloud fell in beside him, and he realised, with the objectivity of a historian, that nothing would ever be the same again. He glanced sideways, but there was nothing to see.

A small blunder, after all. They'd put him on the left, so he couldn't make out what the old fool was saying. Fortunately, he'd taken the trouble to learn his lines, which were straightforward enough in any case. He watched the priest's lips. She was on his right, so he could hear her perfectly well. She mumbled, and got her own name wrong.

During the priest's address he allowed his attention to wander. He was standing directly in front of the altar, above which there was the usual small window, precisely placed so that the first light of dawn fell on the massive iron wheel supposedly inhabited by the divine presence. Across the window a spider had spun an almost perfectly symmetrical web, a work of great skill and diligence. The spider itself hung motionless in the centre, and as the gentle breeze ebbed and flowed it swayed backwards and forwards, moving like the chest of a man breathing slowly. He wasn't the least bit superstitious, but it did occur to him to wonder whether so striking an image had been arranged somehow, put there on purpose for him to see, or whether it was the sheer wastefulness of coincidence. Such a perfect web, and the spider so exactly centred, felt more like art than nature. Under any other circumstances, of course, he'd have squashed the spider immediately. It was second nature, because his mother and sister were both terrified of spiders, and he'd learned to take pre-emptive action as soon as he walked into a room. He'd been scared of them too, at one time, but once he'd mastered every aspect of the art of killing them, he found he wasn't afraid any more. He'd moved smoothly from victim to aggressor, without being conscious of any change within himself, so he supposed that really there was no difference between the two, apart from whether you happened to be the stronger or the weaker.

The actual wedding was, of course, only a small part of it, just as actual fighting is only a small part of a war. After that, they were whisked away into the formal garden. She was swept off to do something or other, while

he had to stay still and be introduced to people: distant relatives, business associates, important people generally. Roughly half of them spoke to his deaf side, which was no bad thing. He'd been trained for that sort of thing, so he knew how to be cripplingly bored without giving offence.

As some fool of a woman twittered in his face, he thought for the first time in years about his grandfather, who'd died when he was ten. No big deal; he just remembered something the old man had said, which he hadn't understood one bit at the time, but which for some reason had stuck with him, like a tune you don't actually like but can't help humming. Arranged marriages, he'd said, amortised loans and the Republican Navy are what keep this city from going under. He realised, in a moment of pure insight, that Grandfather and Father had never really liked each other very much. He examined his memories of the two of them together, things said, tones of voice, nuances of words, body language. It had never occurred to him before that the relationship between them had been anything but entirely orthodox, love and respect in the appropriate proportions. Somehow he'd always assumed that love was something you didn't really have any say in, like rules and the law and the times when meals were served. Parents loved their children, children love their parents, likewise with siblings; husbands and wives were different, he knew that, but it wasn't the same, because marriage was a matter of human choice rather than natural inevitability. Even then, so he'd been informed, husbands and wives grew to love each other over time, through a combination of shared experience and force of habit. The one thing that had nothing to do with love was choice. But Father and Grandfather, it now appeared, hadn't even liked each other. He wondered about that, and felt the assumptions that supported his understanding of the world like the cables of a bridge suddenly go slack. Presumably I shall love my wife, he thought, in time, in due course. Or maybe not. It would be interesting, he decided, to find out.

They met up again briefly after the main reception but before the wedding dinner, by chance rather than design. Escaping from the crowd in the garden, he sneaked away into the little cloister, through the wicket gate at the end and into the courtyard. There was someone already there, standing beside the fountain; a girl in a big white dress that looked familiar. At her feet was a pile of white gauze, which could have been the veil. She looked up at him.

“Excuse me,” he said. “Are you...?”

She nodded.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t recognise you without the...” He twirled his fingers round his head to signify the veil. She was looking straight at him, and he had no idea what that look was supposed to mean. “Which is ridiculous,” he added quickly. “I can see your face so I don’t know who you are. What’s your name?”

No reaction. “Otacilia Licinia Secunda,” she said.

“That’s not what I meant.”

It was as though she was making up her mind. Then she said, “Cilia. At any rate, that’s what my parents call me.”

He nodded. “I’m Basso. Pleased to meet you.”

She laughed; rather cautiously, he felt, and because she assumed he’d want her to. “You escaped, then,” he said.

She nodded. “I couldn’t stand being cooped up in that *thing* a moment longer.”

Thing? His imagination raced. “Oh,” he said, “the veil.”

She kicked it. “I’ll have to put it back on in a minute,” she said, “I’m not supposed to take it off till the meal. But it’s horrible and I hate it. It’s like when you walk through a spider’s web and you get the stuff all over your face and in your hair. Makes my skin crawl.”

Funny she should put it like that. “It sounds awful,” he said.

“Yes, well, you’re not the one who’s got to wear it,” she replied. “Stop complaining, it’s only for one day.” She stabbed at it with her toe, and there was a faint tearing sound. “Shit,” she said.

He grinned. “I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“Don’t you believe it,” she replied. “Mother’ll be livid. I think she’s planning to make it into curtains for the day room.”

He moved a step closer. “The hell with it,” he said. “It’s your wedding day, the most special day of a young girl’s life. If you want to kick holes in your veil, you kick holes in your veil. Anybody’s got problems with that, they’ll have me to answer to.”

She smiled. Actually, she wasn’t bad-looking. And she smiled instead of laughing; for some reason, he liked that. “If it was up to me, I’d tear it into little bits and burn it. We’d better be getting back, or we’ll be in trouble.”

We, she'd said. Ah, he thought, now I understand. "Suppose so," he replied.

"Definitely." She started to bend down, to retrieve the veil, but stopped at approximately twenty degrees. "This dress," she said, "is impossible. There's half a whale's jaw in there somewhere."

He stooped, rather self-consciously, grabbed the veil and straightened up. There was quite a large hole in it. "Give it here," she said, and started winding it round her head, but even he could see it wasn't going on right. "Sod it," she said, "I can't remember how it's supposed to go."

"Let me," he said. "I think I can see..."

He was being rather optimistic, and nearly throttled her before eventually figuring it out. "That'll have to do," she said. "Where's the hole?"

"Round the back," he said. "Nobody's going to see."

"Right." She straightened up, pinched at the skirts of her dress. "You go first. Well, we can't come out together, can we?"

Oh, he thought. "All right," he said. "See you later, then."

"You sure it looks all right? You can't see the hole?"

"It's fine," he reassured her, and walked away.

Much later, he said, "Do you know what to do?"

She glared at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Only," he said quickly, "I don't, so I was sort of hoping you'd—"

She looked at him, another unreadable face, then sighed deeply. "Oh for crying out loud," she said, and explained in detail.

* * *

Some time after that, he said, "I'm sorry for being ugly."

"That's all right," she said, in a sleepy voice. "You can't help it."

He lay still, trying not to think about the darkness. All his life he'd slept with a lamp burning, but there was no lamp in this room and he hadn't sent for one. "Was it...?"

"Yes," she muttered. "You'll get the hang of it. I need to go to sleep now."

On two out of three counts he wasn't sure he believed her. The third was clearly not negotiable. He lay back and tried not to disturb her by moving. He wasn't used to being in bed this early and he didn't feel the least bit tired. Later, when she started to snore, he carefully got out of bed, left the room, felt his way downstairs to the library, where he found a lamp and the book he'd been reading. Obviously he didn't want anybody to find him there, under the circumstances, so he went back upstairs, hugging the lamp close to him to smother the light, and crept through the bedroom into the dressing room. He shut the door, sat down and started to read.

Two

As a wedding present, his father gave him one million shares in the Bank of Charity & Social Justice, and appointed him a general executive trustee. He wasn't sure what that meant. Fairly soon, he found out. It meant he had to go to work.

Work consisted of sitting in the exchequer room. He'd been in there often enough as a child, when he'd been sent to call his father in for dinner. He quite liked it. For one thing, it was quiet, as befitted a place where serious men needed to concentrate. When you first came in, it looked dark, with only one small window, but there were lamps, candles and an open fire, even at midday in summer. One wall was covered from floor to ceiling with ledgers; on the opposite wall hung a huge silver-gilt icon of the Revelation, the tiny smoke-blackened faces of the Elect peering out from under the heavy foil like the noses of rats (Father claimed to like it, but the more likely explanation was that it had ended up there because it had nowhere else to go). Most of all there was the exchequer table itself: a solid square of oak covered with black and white mosaic tiles, like a giant chessboard, piled with heaps of brass and silver counters. He was taught how to use it to make calculations by the chief clerk, a short, elderly Jazygite eunuch by the name of Antigonus Poliorcetes, who'd been given the task of teaching him the basics of his new profession. The clerk was generally considered to be a difficult man, fussy and short-tempered, only kept on because he was indispensable. Basso rather liked him, and tried hard to be a good student. He felt he was making good progress. He quickly got the hang of the exchequer, double-entry bookkeeping, currency

conversion and elementary accounting procedures. It was boring, but no more so than literature or philosophy, and unlike those two annoyances of his youth, he could see there was a point to it.

At the end of the second week, Antigonus closed the ledger they'd been working through together, capped the inkwells, washed his hands in the rather fine silver bowl he kept specially for the purpose, dried them on a towel and said, "So, how do you think you're doing?"

It wasn't for Basso to say, surely. "Not bad," he replied.

"You think so." Antigonus frowned. "Let me put it this way. You have a choice. We can go through the motions, like we've been doing, and at the end of the month I can tell your father you've learned everything you need to know, and then you can get out of here back into the sunshine and go hunting or partying or whatever it is you want to do, and everybody will be happy. Or you can make a serious effort to learn what I can teach you. It's entirely up to you, but it'd be helpful if you could decide now. I have a lot of work to do, and this isn't achieving anything."

"Oh," Basso said. "I thought I was doing quite well."

Antigonus shook his head and smiled. "Listen," he said. "When I was five years old, soldiers came to our village. They burned down the houses, separated the men from the women and children, and marched us onto a ship. Later, they cut my bollocks off and taught me to read and write and do arithmetic, and your grandfather bought me and made me a junior clerk." He paused for a moment, looking out of the tiny window behind Basso's head. "Well, you know what they say. What you never had, you never miss. If the soldiers hadn't taken me, I'd be a goatherd. More likely, I'd be dead, because people don't live long enough to get old where I come from, so I'm not complaining. But I got here because I made an effort. Do you understand?"

Basso nodded slowly. "And I'm not."

"Correct." Antigonus got up, crossed the room and shook charcoal from the scuttle onto the fire. Basso was sweating; it was a warm day. "As I said, the choice is yours. Do you want to do this, or not?"

He realised that he didn't know the answer to that question. He also knew that "I'm not sure" would be construed as "No". Later, when he reflected on how he'd come to reach his decision, he realised it was mostly because he liked Antigonus more than most of the other people he knew,

though why that should be he wasn't quite sure. Maybe it was because the old man pointed out his mistakes.

"Yes," he said.

The next question was difficult. "Why?"

He took a moment, then said, "Because one day I'll own the Bank, assuming Father doesn't run it into the ground first, and I'd like to know how to manage it." Fortunately, Antigonus believed him, or at any rate accepted the answer, and he wasn't called upon to show how he'd arrived at it, like in a mathematical problem.

Things were different after that. To begin with, they were seriously, horribly worse. Why he'd ever imagined he liked the cruel, sarcastic, hectoring, petty-minded old fool he had no idea. Nothing he did was ever right. Furthermore the work, which had seemed so straightforward not so long ago, turned out to be unbelievably difficult. Everything needed thinking about, and either he didn't understand at all or else he thought he understood and was proved wrong, usually with the maximum possible humiliation. For the first time in his life, he was made painfully aware of the monstrous scope of his ignorance of the world. Everything had to be explained to him: the price of a ton of wheat, and the relation it bore to the price of a loaf of bread; how long it took a ship to sail from the City to the Periplus, and how much shipping cost per mile and per day; what ordinary people did for a living and how much money they had to spend and what they tended to spend it on; how the government worked, in theory and in practice; the difference between one-week credit, three-month credit, a mortgage and a debenture; the advantages and drawbacks of the five main types of joint-venture company; the basic elements of commercial law, and why going to law was almost always a waste of time and money; the principal exports of the Republic and its competitors; mental long division; recent trends in finance and the difference between real money and money of account—

"Why on earth do you need to know all that stuff?" Cilia asked him, as he tried to unravel a tangle in his bootlaces. "That's clerks' stuff, surely. You're there to make major policy decisions, not waste your time on trivia."

He tugged at the knot and made it worse. "Antigonus says—"

"Oh, him."

“Antigonus says I need to know everything about the business, or else I’ll be at the mercy of my employees and servants,” he said firmly, like a child reciting. “Also, you can’t make informed decisions unless you know all the background. You need to know how the system works.”

“Fine,” she said, nudging him gently out of the way so she could see in the mirror to comb her hair. “If that’s what Antigonus says, then obviously that’s how it’s got to be. Of course, my father’s managed perfectly well all these years without having to bother with all that rubbish. I suppose he’s just been lucky.”

Basso grinned. “My father’s never done mental arithmetic in his life and he hasn’t got a clue what you’d pay for a quart of anchovies in the market,” he said. “And he’s nearly ruined this family more times than I care to think about. I sort of get the impression that following his example wouldn’t be such a good idea.”

“Good point.” There was a gentle crack, and she took the comb out of her hair and examined it. “Stupid thing’s broken,” she said, and he could see where three of the ivory teeth had snapped off. “Get me a proper silver one. I’m always breaking this sort.”

He looked away. Cilia was always asking for things, and he didn’t have any money. So far the idea of paying him for his work hadn’t been discussed; he’d tried to raise the subject with his father, who’d ignored the question, and Antigonus had just laughed. That meant he’d have to talk to Mother, or see if his sister would make him a loan out of her dress allowance. Of course, Cilia wouldn’t keep breaking things if she handled them a bit more gently.

“Another thing,” she said. “I don’t see why you’ve got to spend all day in that stupid room with that stupid old man. Surely you could at least have afternoons off.”

“It’s only till I’ve learned the basics.”

Maybe deafness was catching, because quite often she didn’t seem to hear things he said. “The whole point of being married,” she said, “is not having to stay cooped up indoors all the time. So, how do I spend my days? Cooped up all the time, doing needlework. Playing chess with my halfwit maid. Reading books. For all the good it’s done me I might as well have stayed at home.”

Maybe she hadn't really meant that. "Once I've finished my lessons with Antigonus there'll be plenty of time," he said. "And then..."

And then. It was just as well he didn't have to finish the sentence. And then what? He wasn't quite sure about that. For some time, he'd suspected that he was falling in love with his wife (which was how it was supposed to be, after all; but he wasn't quite sure he was going about it the right way). At the same time, she was getting on his nerves. There were times, when they were apart, when all he could see was her face and body, and the urge to leave what he was doing and run to find her was almost more than he could bear. When he was with her, though, it wasn't quite the same. It was, he decided, a bit like literature. In literature—epic poems and classic drama and the like—gods and goddesses disguised themselves as mortals, and evil spirits took over people's bodies; and maybe, he rationalised, that's what had happened to her. He found it infuriatingly difficult to reconcile the way she looked with some of the things she said and did. She could be spiteful, petty-minded, incredibly insensitive. No big deal. What he found hardest to cope with was that she was boring to be with. When they were alone together and not making love (the euphemism was particularly inappropriate in this instance), he felt the way he used to feel when his least favourite relatives came to call, the restless, aching boredom that can only be kept in check by playing word games in your head, counting the tiles on the floor, imagining a game of chess, or picturing the inflicter of the boredom being torn apart by wolves. That wasn't love. He was prepared to believe that, in extreme cases, it was marriage, but only after half a century of egregious incompatibility. It's because we're both young, he told himself, immature and self-centred as a pair of drill-chucks. Also, when he tried to be objective, he found it hard to blame her. Her average day consisted of a late breakfast alone, a morning spent sewing or trying on clothes with her maid, lunch with her mother-in-law, followed by more sewing, reading, sketching, practising the lute and harp or exercising some other fatuous accomplishment held suitable for young noblewomen, concluding with family dinner at the long table, an hour sitting with the other women of the household, knowing her place, and finally bed with him, where he expected fiery passion and romantic love. He couldn't help thinking there had to be a better way for a person to live; especially for the wife and daughter of

leading citizens of the Republic, and therefore one of the most privileged and fortunate women alive.

He could see all that. Any fool could. The problem was, there wasn't anything he could do about it. If they had a house of their own, of course; or if they could run away together and live in the woods—no, she'd hate that. Spiders, for one thing. If it was just the two of them, without all the other people. He thought about that and shuddered. At least other people meant someone you could talk to.

We'll grow out of it, he told himself. People do. Or they grow into it, the way your foot adapts if you spend twenty years wearing shoes that are three sizes too small. In any case, it would resolve itself (because if it didn't, society couldn't function), and in the mean time, at least he had his work to occupy his mind.

Three days before the twins were born, Antigonus came in late. Instead of sitting down and reading through the morning reports in silence, he solemnly placed a small wicker basket in the centre of the exchequer table and took away the napkin that covered the contents.

"What's this?" Basso asked.

Antigonus looked at him gravely. "We're celebrating," he said.

Amazing behaviour. "Celebrating what?" Basso asked. "The baby hasn't come yet, if that's what..."

The old man lifted a large round simnel cake out of the basket and looked round for something to put it down on. "We're celebrating," he said, "the end of the war. King Moemfasia surrendered last night."

What war? He had to think about it. "The Metanni," he said. "The dispute about the Strait of Neanousa."

"Correct." Basso felt as though he'd just earned a bonus mark. "We now control the whole of the east coast as far as the Soter Peninsula." He paused. "Well?"

It was as though someone had knocked a hole through into a walled-up room in the back of his mind. "Which means," Basso said, "that we can shave two days each way off the grain run to the Euoptic..."

"Very good."

“Which means we can undercut Ousa on bulk grain to the southern market and put them out of the game altogether...”

“And?”

“And,” Basso chanted triumphantly, “that explains why you insisted that we buy seven thousand shares in the Asinarii shipping line, the day after they announced a massive loss and the price dropped sixty per cent...”

“Because?”

“Because the Asinarii bought the east coast route when it was worthless, and nobody believed we could beat Moemfasia at sea.” He stopped and frowned. “But it was impossible. Well, you know what I mean. Highly unlikely. What made you think...?”

Antigonus actually smiled. “Hint,” he said. “Barrel staves.”

“Oh.” The hole in the wall became a huge breach. In fact, there wasn’t any wall left. “That report from our agent in Soter City about the large consignment of barrel staves that went down in a storm.”

“Excellent.” The smile broadened. “And?”

“And without seasoned barrel staves you can’t make barrels, and without barrels you can’t carry water, and without water, you can’t keep a fleet at sea for more than a day at a time, which meant Moemfasia...”

Antigonus nodded slowly. “Exactly so,” he said. “I deduced that the King would try and find an alternative source of supply, but he would fail, because...”

Basso laughed. “Because four months ago you ordered our man in Artouche to buy up all the seasoned planked oak he could find, which you then sold to the government at five per cent mark-up.” Basso nodded furiously. “And at the time I wondered why you were going to so much trouble over a deal that barely broke even after costs.”

“Actually, we made money,” Antigonus reproved him, “but you’re quite right, it wasn’t worth the candle as a deal for its own sake; though we did impress the War Office with our patriotism, which will stand us in good stead when the next round of supply contracts comes along.”

Basso laughed. “But actually, you won the war.”

“I suppose so.” Antigonus shrugged. “I knew we would eventually, so that’s beside the point. What mattered was the timing. That was what I had to control precisely.”

“Oh come on,” Basso said. “You must admit, there was a bit of luck involved.”

“Not really,” Antigonus replied quietly. “At the same time as I was negotiating the sale of the stave lumber to the War Office, I was corresponding with the King through the Soter City office. As long as the King thought there was a chance of getting the staves, which he knew I had, he’d leave his fleet where it was, in the bay. Naturally I had no intention of selling to him, but I was able to keep the war going until the Asinarii announced their results, at which point I broke off negotiations with the King, which left him with no alternative but to try to beat us once and for all in a major pitched battle. On my advice, your father persuaded the Senate to recall Admiral Carausius, which meant our navy was temporarily leaderless and unable to engage the enemy. At that point, the King’s time ran out and he had to surrender. No,” he added, wiping a penknife on his handkerchief and cutting into the cake, “luck didn’t really have much to do with it. Not,” he added, “that luck isn’t an important factor in business. Your father, for example, has no commercially valuable qualities apart from luck; but he has a remarkably consistent record of being quite ridiculously lucky when it really matters.” He balanced a slice of cake on the blade of the knife and conveyed it into Basso’s hands. “So consistent, in fact, that I was prepared to accept it as valid and valuable collateral when I decided to come and work for him. I,” he added solemnly, cutting another slice, “have no luck at all, just intelligence, shrewdness and a degree of intuition. You’re not eating your cake.”

“Actually, I don’t like simnel cake.”

“Eat it anyway,” Antigonus said, making it clear that he was giving a direct order. “In my country, there are certain occasions that must be celebrated with simnel cake. For example, the successful conclusion of an apprenticeship.”

Very slowly and quietly, Basso said: “What does that mean?”

“Surely that’s obvious,” Antigonus said, with his mouth full. “It’s my professional opinion that you’re fit to be allowed out on your own without a wet-nurse or a keeper. If you try and cross the road, there’s a better than even chance you’ll make it to the other side in one piece. Given time, you could probably tie your own bootlaces. In other words, you’ve come a very

long way in a very short time, and I'm sending you back to your father. Well done," he added, as Basso looked at him. "You passed."

"Oh," Basso said. "What does that mean?"

Antigonus sighed. "I was given the job of teaching you the basics of the banking trade. I consider that I have done so. I can now go back to my own office in the Exchange, which is considerably larger and warmer than this, and catch up on my own work. You," he added kindly, "stay here. This is your office now."

Basso blinked. "My...?"

Antigonus stood up slowly. "Well," he said, "nominally it's your father's, but if I were you I'd try and keep him out of it as much as possible. You'd be amazed how much damage a man like him can do in a relatively short time."

"Yes," Basso said, with a slight edge of desperation to his voice, "but what am I supposed to do?"

"Run the Bank," Antigonus said. He was loading things into the cake-basket; his silver hand-washing bowl, his inkwell, his special silver-handled penknife that nobody else was allowed to use. "Decide what you're going to do, then write it down, call a runner and send me my instructions at the Exchange, and I'll carry them out. I am, after all, your slave, your chattel, with no free will of my own." He lifted Basso's elbow off a book of mathematical tables, which he put in the basket. "I haven't done today's morning reports, they're there in the tray, same as usual. You may want to reply to the Trebonianus letter first, and you'd better chase up the Sulpicii over the seven per cent debenture stock revaluation. It's been..." He paused, as if reconsidering a rash start, then said, "Much to my surprise, it's been a pleasure. You have the makings of an intellect, Bassianus Arcadius. You'll make a ghastly hash of things for about six months, and then I predict you'll do just fine. With your permission." He opened the door and stood there, until Basso realised he was waiting to be dismissed.

"Come back here," Basso said. "I can't do all this stuff on my own."

Antigonus shook his head. He looked, Basso decided, like a small white beetle. "With your permission," he repeated.

Basso jumped up. "If you're my slave," he said, "I order you to come back in here."

Antigonus smiled. "No," he said. "Goodbye, Basso. And good luck."

The door closed. Basso sat down again, nearly missing the chair and ending up on the floor. He felt stunned, terrified and absurdly pleased with himself. I can't do this, he thought; then he considered his father—best deal I ever made—and decided he probably could. Six months, Antigonus had said. Very well. But perhaps, if he tried really hard, he could shave that down to five.

He got up out of his chair and walked round the desk to where Antigonus sat, used to sit. The thin-legged, elegant chair creaked under his greater weight, but he leaned back anyway and breathed in and out, deeply, five times, the way his fencing instructor had taught him before a fight. Then he picked up the morning reports and started to read.

When the twins were two years old, shortly after his sister's wedding, Basso launched the first major coup of his banking career, the takeover of the Mutual Brotherhood of Friends.

"Their capital assets are significantly undervalued," he explained to his father, as they practised archery on the lawn. "Whereas they're dangerously overextended on their government loans. The government won't default, obviously, but it means their cash reserves aren't high enough to fight us off. We could go after them through proxies, and they wouldn't know a thing about it until it's all over."

His father was quiet, concentrating on his aim. He was a naturally talented archer, and worked hard at it. When he loosed, the arrow clipped the thin black line between purple inner and gold centre. "We're inward scoring, aren't we?" he asked innocently.

"Outward, I thought," Basso replied. "So that's just a nine."

His father drew an arrow from his quiver and nocked it. "You do know who the Vitellii's chief clerk is, don't you?" he said. Basso smiled, but Father went on: "You remember Antigonus Poliorcetes, who used to work for us? Well, of course you do, he taught you everything you know. Well, it's him."

"Yes," Basso said.

"Well?" Father drew evenly, loosed smoothly and followed through. No ambiguity this time; gold at five o'clock. "You really believe you can get the better of him in a bank deal?"

“I know how he thinks,” Basso replied.

Father shrugged. “Good for you,” he said. “But I doubt it. Best chief clerk we ever had, and I’ll never forgive Sano Vitelli for poaching him off us. You let a slave have his freedom, and how does he thank you? No loyalty, that’s what’s wrong with this city.”

“I know him better than he knows himself,” Basso said. “He always had a tendency to underestimate himself. You’d never guess it to listen to him, but it was there nevertheless. I can handle him, trust me.”

Father loosed—an honest nine at two o’clock, but Basso could see he was annoyed with himself. After they’d retrieved the arrows Basso took his time over his first shot, but dropped it low, in the eight. He wasn’t much good at archery, but he tried hard.

“It’s up to you,” Father said. “I won’t have to mortgage anything, will I, or put up anything as security?”

“The Bank can cover it,” Basso lied, “we’ve got stocks and Treasury loans we can put up against the borrowing.” Father hadn’t noticed, but his business seal had been missing from the top drawer of his desk for a week, during which time Basso hadn’t been idle. “I won’t lie to you,” he said. “Obviously there’s a certain element of retribution involved. Also, I want Antigonus back.”

“After he betrayed us like that? Absolutely not.”

Basso took his second shot. He knew he had a tendency to pull low, so he held a little bit higher, and just managed to avoid the inside edge of the gold line. “Shot,” his father said approvingly. Basso felt like he’d cheated.

“Antigonus is one of the best men in the trade,” Basso said. “I want him back.”

“We’ll discuss it later,” Father said. “Concentrate on your last shot. A ten and you’ve won it.”

Like it mattered; but of course it did matter. He tried the same technique again, but this time, without realising it, he avoided the loosing error that dragged his shots low. As a result the arrow flew perfectly true and pitched exactly where he’d aimed it, a finger’s breadth into the nine.

“Scores level,” Father said; and Basso knew he was proud of his son; but for shooting arrows, which was just a game. “Best of three or sudden death?”

“Best of three,” Basso replied. “You first.”

Father shot two tens and a nine; Basso's first shot was an eight, which lost him the match and saved him having to waste further concentration and effort on a pastime. "So," he said, as they pulled out the arrows. "How about it?"

Father shrugged. "So long as there's no risk to us outside the Bank, I suppose you might as well go ahead," he said; which when translated meant, I don't understand this stuff but apparently you do; carry on. Fair enough. Recognising the superior gifts of others was one of Father's strengths. "But I really don't like the thought of taking Antigonus back."

"He's a free man now," Basso replied; "he may well prefer to resign."

"I hope so," Father said.

But he didn't. When the coup was complete and Vipsanius Vitellius had signed the transfer of undertakings (never before had Basso seen such concentrated hatred in a man's eyes; he studied it carefully and with great interest), he summoned Antigonus to his office in the Exchange.

"I like what you've done with it," the old man said. "You have taste, which is rare in people of your class."

Basso smiled and pointed to a chair. "I had someone choose for me," he said. "My wife, actually."

"Ah." Antigonus sat down. "Just as I said. The Licinii are parvenus, new money, and therefore not nobility. Accordingly, it's perfectly possible that your wife has good taste."

"I'll tell her you said that." Basso leaned forward a little and folded his hands. It was one of Antigonus' mannerisms, which he'd adopted and made his own, so that he no longer realised he was doing it. "Well?" he said.

"I suppose congratulations are in order."

Basso smiled, opened a box on the floor next to his chair and took out a simnel cake. "I found it's an acquired taste," he said. "I've acquired it."

Antigonus didn't move. "Is that all it was?" he said. "Getting your own back."

"Certainly not." Basso cut the cake with his special gold-handled penknife, which nobody else was allowed to use. "It's a very sound investment. The Friends and the Charity combined will be the fourth-biggest bank in the Republic. When we win the war and the Treasury pays back its loans, I'll pay off the debt I took on, and I'll have got your bank for

nothing.” He paused and frowned. “We are going to win the war, aren’t we?”

Antigonus laughed. “Of course we are,” he said. “We have the best mercenary army money can buy, and the Ogive are savages. We’d have won comfortably six months ago, if we hadn’t had that difficulty with supplies.”

Basso grinned, a childish grin of pure joy. “I knew I was right,” he said. “It was you, wasn’t it?”

“That would be treason,” Antigonus said. “If it could be proved that I’d deliberately bought up stocks of oats and bacon with a view to preventing the War Office from supplying the army, with the result that the spring offensive had to be put back...”

“Of course,” Basso said. “You did nothing of the sort. You were just speculating in commodities, which is perfectly legitimate, and when the time came to sell, the War Office couldn’t meet your price. Later you dropped the price, out of sheer patriotic fervour, and sold them the supplies at seven per cent over cost; practically gave them the stuff.” He shook his head. “Come and work for me again,” he said. “It’d be fun.”

“Work for you again,” Antigonus repeated. “It’s a way of looking at it, I suppose.”

“For as in on behalf of.” Basso took a bite out of his cake. “Well?”

Antigonus reached across the desk, picked up Basso’s penknife, cut the tip off his wedge of cake and popped it into his mouth. “I don’t have a choice, do I?”

Basso shook his head. “I bought up the loan you took out to buy your freedom from my father,” he said. “There’s a foreclosure clause.”

“In that case, I accept.”

“Of course you do.” Basso retrieved his knife and cut two more slices of cake. “To the successful conclusion of an apprenticeship,” he said.

“Indeed.” Antigonus nodded. “But I’d ask you to consider that in order to pass the exam, you don’t necessarily have to kill the examiner.”

Basso thought about that. “No,” he said. “Not necessarily.”

His sister had married a Carausius, the junior branch of the family. In theory he ran the glass factory, but his commitments to it didn’t seem to cut unduly into his free time. Mostly, as far as Basso could gather, he bred and raced

horses—a harmless enough occupation, and there was always the chance he'd fall off and break his neck.

In due course, there was a son. He was born at the Carausius family house on the Horn, and it was a month before Basso could find the time to go and see him.

"He's got your eyes," he said.

She smiled and shook her head. "He takes after his father," she replied.

"You think so?" Basso said mildly. "I don't see it myself."

"You're a man," she reminded him. "When men look at babies, all they see is an ugly pink lump. Anyway," she went on, "he hasn't got the Severus jaw."

"Small mercies," Basso said.

She laughed. "Six pounds, eight ounces and he'll have to do, to be going on with. I'm not going through all that again in a hurry."

Basso peered down at his nephew, but all he could see was an ugly pink lump with a creased face and fingers like tiny crawling worms. "Where's Palo?" he said.

"He's got two horses in a big meeting at Simisca," she replied, making some delicate technical adjustment to the baby's wrappings. "He'll be back tomorrow afternoon, probably. Can you stay till then? I know he'd like to see you."

That was a big, heavy lie. He decided to go round it. "Chosen the godparents yet?"

She sighed. "Don't get me started on that," she said. "It's all turned horribly political between Paso's mother and his uncles. Apparently, whoever we choose, we're going to cause mortal offence to everybody." She lowered her voice, even though they were alone. "Honestly, our family's bad enough but compared to his lot, they're angels. Every little thing gets picked up and turned into a major issue."

"Choose me," Basso said.

She looked at him as though he'd made a bad joke. Then she looked thoughtful. "I can't," she said. "You're my brother."

"And?"

She started to say something, but didn't.

"It's quite all right," he said, "having an uncle for your godfather. It used to happen all the time about a hundred years ago. It'd get you out of all

the politicking.”

“Palo wouldn’t...”

“Even better.” He grinned. “I didn’t say that. No, seriously. If it’d keep your in-laws from each other’s throats, I’d be delighted.”

She frowned. It made her eyebrows meet in the middle. She’d always hated her eyebrows, so of course he’d teased her about them incessantly. “I’ll have to think about it,” she said.

“You do that.” He yawned. “Wish I’d had a godfather who owned a bank,” he said. “But no, I got a priest. Other kids got nice stuff for their birthdays, or even legal tender. What did I get? Prayers for my immortal soul.”

She smiled. “Palo’s mother’s preferred choice is an archdeacon,” she said. “The Most August Opelius Macrinus, DM. Terribly high-powered; runs the collegiate temple at Ennea.”

“I didn’t know your lot were hooked into the Opelii.”

“Well, they are.” The baby stirred and started to yowl. “They’re related to practically everybody, if you go back far enough.”

“Sounds like family bashes are a bit of an ordeal.”

“You’d know, if you ever came.”

He smiled sweetly. “Pressure of work,” he said. “You have no idea, the sacrifices I have to make.”

She looked at him. “Go away,” she said, “you’re corrupting my son.”

“Good,” he said, and got up to leave. “Chosen a name yet?”

“Actually, yes,” she said. “I’m going to call him Basso.”

Basso stood quite still for a moment. Then he said, “There’s a coincidence,” and left the room.

Bassianus Arcadius Carausius was received into the mercy of the Invincible Sun in the archepiscopal temple in the City. Afterwards, there was a reception at the Severus town house, hosted (and paid for) by the proud godfather. Later, people said it was a strangely muted affair. A great deal of money had clearly been spent on food, decorations and musicians—there was even a mock sea battle in the main courtyard, where a lead-lined tank had been specially installed for a dozen gilded miniature ships, manned by children and dwarfs, to row about on and ram each other—but the guests

felt uncomfortable and the party broke up immediately after the banquet. The general consensus was that Bassianus Severus was a pretty poor host. In some respects, he'd tried too hard, while in others he'd made no effort at all. Even the going-home presents were all wrong; expensive, yes, but tasteless and (not to put too fine a point on it) boring. Aelius Scaurus, for example, received an exotic Melvian parrot in a silver-gilt cage, while Manlia Scantilla was given the same pair of heavy antique earrings that she'd passed on to her niece the previous year. She wasn't pleased to have them back again—she'd always hated them, which was why she'd given them away—and she was bitterly offended to think that her niece had thought so little of her generous gift that she'd sold it, or pawned it, or given it to one of her lovers.

“Young Basso probably had no idea,” her husband said during the coach ride home.

“Probably not,” his wife replied. “And that's no excuse. If he spent less time money-grubbing and more time in decent society, he'd have seen me wearing the wretched things and wouldn't have bought them. Besides, it was unforgivably ostentatious. He must've paid every penny of a hundred nomismata for them.”

Basso (who'd taken the earrings as security for a seventy-nomismata loan on which Scantilla's niece had defaulted) intercepted his sister and brother-in-law on their way out. The baby had gone on ahead, whisked away by his nurse and four footmen.

“Palo,” he said, in a louder than usual voice, “I don't know if you've met my wife. Cilia, this is my brother-in-law.”

They nodded to each other, warily, like two strange dogs meeting in the street. Basso could see his sister was impatient to leave, but Palo didn't seem to be in any hurry. “Actually,” Palo said, “I have an idea we've met before. Weren't you at Furio Relio's reception the other day?”

Cilia smiled sweetly. “No,” she said. “I never go anywhere. Lina,” she went on, looking past him at Basso's sister, “how are your parents? Keeping well?”

“Fine, thanks. How about the twins? They're not here, I see.”

“They're at their tutor's,” Basso said. “They get fractious at social events.”

“Like their father,” Cilia said. “Lina, you’ve got no idea what I had to go through to get him to behave. You’d think he was brought up on a farm.”

Lina smiled. “He was,” she replied. “Sorry, didn’t he tell you?”

“Of course I did,” Basso interrupted.

“Till he was six,” Lina went on. “His great-uncle Naio’s farm on the Horn. That’s where he picked up most of his bad habits.”

“It was only for the summers,” Basso said, “and the winter of the plague, of course, when I was four.”

Cilia nodded gravely. “That would explain a lot,” she said. She was looking at Palo, whose attention was fixed on the great three-handed gold cup Basso had given his nephew as an Acceptance present. Basso had an uncomfortable feeling that Palo was trying to figure out how much it would fetch. He made a mental note to send a message round to the fashionable pawnbrokers.

Later, his father asked him: “How much did you spend?”

Basso told him. “It’s all right,” he added. “We can afford it. In fact, I paid for it out of the household budget.”

Father was dead quiet for a moment. Shocked, but not necessarily in a bad way. “We can really afford to spend five thousand nomismata on a reception?”

“No big deal,” Basso replied.

“Good heavens.” Father was looking thoughtful. “Well, that’s good news. I must be considerably better off than I thought I was.”

Father didn’t know the half of it, which was, of course, just as well. It was a pity he’d had to find out, especially with the start of the election campaign only a few months away, but it had been inevitable if he was to give his godson a proper Acceptance. He resolved to fake a substantial loss after a tactful interval.

“So how much did you pay for that goblet thing?”

“A hundred and sixty,” Basso said. “I got it trade, naturally. The Seleucus brothers owe us a lot of money.”

Father shrugged. “Best goldsmiths in town,” he said. “I just hope that bastard doesn’t hock it before young Bassano comes of age.”

Basso sat down on the stone balustrade of the cloister. “I was wondering about that,” he said. “Is he short of money?”

“Those bloody horses,” Father replied. “Also, he bets heavily on them, and they have a tiresome habit of finishing last, if they finish at all. It’s just as well he only gets the income from his settlement trust.”

Ah, Basso thought. So that’s all right. “When does he get the capital?”

“Thirty,” Father replied. “And with any luck he’ll have killed himself chariot-racing before then, whereupon the capital devolves on Lina’s trustees till Bassano comes of age.”

“Trustees?”

Father smiled. “You and me,” he said. “I suppose I should be worried sick about my son-in-law’s dangerous hobbies, but there you go, nobody’s perfect. No, if Palo gets himself smashed up and dies, we come into a very tidy sum.” He shrugged. “Here’s hoping,” he said, and went into the house.

When the twins were seven years old, a few weeks after Bassano’s fifth birthday, the Bank of National Unity, owned by the Coritani brothers, collapsed. The failure of the only major foreign-owned bank in the City came as a devastating surprise to everyone (almost everyone). Even Antigonus Poliorcetes, chief clerk to the Severi, hadn’t seen it coming.

“You’re getting old,” Basso replied, with a broad grin. “Five years ago —”

“Just a moment,” Antigonus interrupted. “You’re not trying to tell me it was you.”

The grin became a beaming smile. “All me,” he said. “Well, the Coritani boys helped, by being greedy. But they couldn’t have done it without me.”

Antigonus sat still and quiet for a moment, clearly struggling. Then he snapped, “Well?”

Basso settled himself comfortably in his chair. “What brought them down,” he said, “was the two-million-nomismata loan they made to General Tzimiscus.”

“Good heavens.” The old man’s eyes were wide open. “Whatever possessed them to finance a private war?”

“Ah.” Basso nodded. “You may well ask. Naturally, any sensible man called upon to lend two million to a soldier of fortune on the security of a ten per cent share in the anticipated plunder of an impregnable walled city would run a mile. But,” he went on, raising his voice over the sound of

Antigonus' spluttering, "when I let it be known that I'd put in three million and didn't want anybody to know about it..."

"They believed you?"

Basso sighed. "It was their own stupid fault," he said, "for planting a spy in the office. As soon as I found out..."

"From your spy in their office."

Basso dipped his head in confirmation. "Naturally, I made sure all my most sensitive and confidential papers were carefully secured in my beautiful new safe. How was I to know that the Coritani's spy was an expert locksmith? At least, that's what he'd told them, but he was exaggerating. It took him a week to get the thing open, and the lock was nothing special. I came within an inch of having to leave the keys lying about on my desk."

Antigonus stroked his chin. "So they made the loan?"

"And Tzimiscus and his band of inadequates duly set out and got chopped into little pieces, and I bought what was left of the Unity for sixpence on the nomisma. Their loan-book on its own is worth a million, quite apart from their government debt. Best deal I ever made, as Father would say. It'll cost me a bit to stop the run, but once the investors find out it's been taken over by the Charity, things'll settle down soon enough." He picked up his gold-handled penknife and tested its point against the pad of his forefinger. "And you honestly didn't see it? Really?"

Antigonus shook his head. "Like you said," he replied quietly, "I'm getting old. Maybe I should think about retiring come the spring."

"Balls," Basso said. "No offence intended," he added. "It's no reflection on you if your star pupil turns out to be even more brilliant than you are. Couldn't have done it without your invaluable early guidance, and so forth."

"Perfectly true," Antigonus replied. "So, did you call me in here just so you could gloat at an old man?"

"Partly." Basso folded the penknife, turned it over a couple of times in his hands and put it in his pocket. "Mostly, though, I want you to mind the store for me for a day or two. Now this thing's safely over, I fancy a break and a breath of fresh air. I'm going to go home, sweep up Cilia and the twins and head for the Horn. Business is all very well, but there's other things in life."

Antigonus got up. "So I gather," he replied. "Well, enjoy yourself. I'll tell the lynch mob you neglected to leave a forwarding address."

Once Antigonus had gone, he spent half an hour dealing with the things that really couldn't wait, then slipped out of the office by the back door, past the coal shed and the stables and into the street. On his way home, he stopped in the covered market and bought flowers for Cilia and honey-cakes for the twins. The steel-grey clouds that had hung over the City for the last three days were beginning to splinter, though he had no idea what the weather would be like at the Horn.

The porter seemed surprised to see him; reasonably enough, since he hardly ever came home before close of trading. "Is my father in?" he asked.

The porter shook his head. "Went out soon after you did, sir," he replied. "Not expected back till tomorrow."

No point asking if he'd said where he was going. "When he gets back, tell him I'd like a word." He walked quickly across the courtyard and ran up the back stairs to the day gallery. It occurred to him that at this time of day he was a stranger in this house, unaware of its routines and operating procedures. There didn't seem to be anybody about, so presumably the maids had finished the morning chores and the twins were with their tutor in the schoolroom. She wasn't in the day solar; the sampler she was working on lay on the table by the window, next to a stack of books and a chequers board. She wasn't in her dressing room either, so he tried the bedroom.

She was there all right. She had her back to him as he pushed open the door; she was kneeling, naked, on the bed and he could see a man's feet and legs sticking out under her. For a moment he simply didn't understand. Then a man's voice said, "Shit"; he recognised it. Palo and Cilia, which was impossible.

She couldn't have heard him, or didn't detect the sudden change in his voice; she carried on shoving with her hips, but he was trying to scramble to his feet, pushing with his hands against the sides of the bed. Basso opened his mouth, but he couldn't think of anything to say.

Palo must've pushed her, quite hard, because she toppled sideways and landed on the floor with a bump. Palo was on his feet, grabbing for his shirt; no, for something under it, something hanging off the back of the chair it

was draped over. He looked ridiculous. Cilia had turned to see what he was staring at. Their eyes met. He saw anger.

“Palo,” she said. “Do something.”

Palo was still fumbling with the shirt. Whatever he was trying to get at was jammed in one of the sleeves. Basso heard himself say, “Cilia, what the hell do you think you’re doing?” and wondered what had made him say that. Mostly he felt numb, but also embarrassed. He’d been taught it was rude to walk in on people with no clothes on.

“Palo, for God’s sake,” Cilia said, and Basso realised what was slung over the back of the chair, tangled in the shirt. Palo, a conscientious follower of fashion, had adopted the soldier-of-fortune look that was so popular in the City right now, mostly with junior clerks and apprentices. Palo liked to dress common, in a savagely expensive way.

It was, of course, only a dress dagger, jewelled gilded hilt and a bit of old tin for a blade. But Palo was coming straight at him, the dagger held overhand and low; he was doing the exaggerated crouch, the mark of someone who’s watched a few exhibition bouts and wrongly assumed he’s learned something. “Palo, don’t be so bloody stupid,” he said, but then Palo lashed out at him, and the tin blade slid across the muscle of his forearm. He didn’t feel anything, but out of the corner of his eye he could see a big, gaudy patch of red, like a rose petal. He jumped backwards and found he had his back to the wall, and Palo was crowding him, to stop him using his arms.

For some reason, that cleared his mind, and he was able to decide what to do. His right hand let go of the flowers, dropped into his pocket and found the gold-handled penknife; he pinched the blade between forefinger and thumb and shook hard, opening the blade until the spring clicked in place. Palo chose that moment to stab him. With his left hand, he caught the blade, gripping tight. He felt the blade cut him, but that really didn’t matter. Palo froze; he hadn’t been expecting that, and for a moment he didn’t seem to be able to decide what to do next. Then he tried to tug the knife out of Basso’s hand. That made it cut deeper, but Basso tightened his grasp, at the same time working the penknife back a little further into his right hand, until he had a sort of a grip.

Palo hadn’t registered the penknife; he was staring into Basso’s eyes with a weird mixture of fury and terror, as he yanked on the dagger-hilt.

Maintaining eye contact, Basso reached wide round behind Palo's head with his right hand, applied the point of the penknife to where he guessed the jugular vein must be, and pressed. He was shocked at how little pressure it took; and then a jet of blood hit him in the face. He let go of Palo's knife and jerked sideways, hoping very much that the fight was over, since he couldn't see a thing. He heard a bump while he was mopping at his eyes with his sleeve. He breathed in, which took some doing. His left hand had started hurting, and the pain made him feel sick.

Someone was yelling, making a fuss. "Palo," she screeched, and the sound of her voice disgusted him. The first thing he looked at was his left hand, which was a sodden mess of red around two deep purple lines. Then he looked at her. She was standing at the foot of the bed, and there was so much hate in her face, in every line and contour of it, that he realised there was only one thing he could do. He looked down at the body (it was a body now, not his brother-in-law; a man he'd never really liked much, but hadn't seriously wished any harm to) and stepped carefully over it, to avoid slipping in the blood. He didn't know whether he'd expected her to try and get out of the way. She didn't. Presumably it simply didn't occur to her that she was in any danger. She was too blazingly angry with him for that.

Three paces (he didn't hurry) and he was close enough. He grabbed for her hair with his left hand, caught a handful but his fingers wouldn't close. She smacked him across the face, spitefully hard, and was drawing her hand back for another strike when he stuck the knife under her chin and gave it a flick, like opening a letter. She opened her mouth to say something, but simply couldn't. Then her eyes went blank, and she dropped.

Basso had never seen anyone die before. It was only later that he figured out what it reminded him of: a glass of water being poured out, one second full, the next empty. Her lips were still moving when the last drop left her, and then she just fell sideways, like a piece of furniture carelessly knocked over. Her head cracked against the leg of the bed, making a wooden sound, like a stick hitting a ball. From a woman to a thing in the time it takes to blink.

He heard someone calling him. Not Bassianus, not Basso, the other thing he was called. Oh, he thought, and turned round. The twins were standing in the doorway, looking at him.

"Daddy?" he heard.

For some reason, he folded up the knife and put it back in his pocket. "Go to your room," he said. "Now."

Neither of them moved. They were staring at him, and it occurred to him that the look on their faces must be very much like the look on his own, when he'd first come in. "Now," he repeated, raising his voice as though he was angry, as though *they* were the ones who'd just done something bad.

They were properly brought-up children, and did as they were told. Once he was sure they'd gone, he stepped away from the bed and looked at her, slumped on her side, as though nobody could be bothered to pick her up and put her away. She lay with her back to him, so he couldn't see the huge red gash, but there was no way he could've mistaken her stillness for sleep. I did that, he thought.

The pain in his hand made him shiver. He looked at it again, and tried flexing it. Something was badly wrong, it wasn't working properly. Well, he told himself, it was that or be stabbed. I had no choice, with either of them.

And it had started out to be such a nice day. He had to close his eyes before he could turn away, as though some kind of lock or latch held him in place as long as he could see her on the floor. Blood everywhere. Mess. He breathed out slowly, in again slowly. Now he was going to have to clear it all up.

He went to the doorway, opened his mouth, and realised he couldn't remember the names of any of the maids; and without names, he couldn't call them. That was ridiculous, so he shouted, "Hello," as loudly as he could. It came out thin and squeaky, like a non-singer trying to sing a hymn in temple. "Here," he shouted, "quick as you can." Pathetic, he thought.

Probably just as well that it was a footman who came first, rather than a maid. He didn't scream or anything like that. He stood in the doorway, mouth open, eyes bulging, throat moving. For crying out loud, Basso thought.

"Run to the guardhouse and bring the duty officer," he said. "Now, come on. And get the house steward to round up the maids." He paused. Properly speaking, nothing should be touched till the Guard got here. "Tell them to stand by," he added, though he wasn't quite sure what he meant by it.

The footman bolted and left him alone. He wanted to sit down, but he couldn't bring himself to sit on the bed, and the chairs were soaked in

blood. He knew he should be thinking, calmly and methodically; figuring out what his position was, what he needed to do in order to secure it. Maybe; but he couldn't. How long was it since he'd come bounding up the stairs? It couldn't have been long; maybe about as much time as it takes to make an omelette. Surprising how much of a difference you can make in a few minutes.

The guardhouse was on the corner of the Clockmakers' and the Ropewalk. The footman would run there; then there'd be a short exchange with the sergeant, who'd go and fetch the captain, who'd probably, in the circumstances, send out for the ranking officer of the department before setting out himself. He'd walk, but quickly, and he'd bring two, no, four troopers with him. He went into the dressing room, picked up a chair and carried it through into the bedroom.

The Guard arrived sooner than he'd anticipated. There was a tall man with a short ginger beard, about eight years his senior, followed by six soldiers. The officer (no brigandine, just an arming shirt—hardly regulation) looked at him and said, "You."

Basso wanted to laugh, but he knew it wouldn't be seemly. "I know you," he said. "What's your name?"

The officer was looking past him, at the bodies and the blood. "Major Aelius, Seventeenth Auxiliary. You're..."

Basso allowed himself to smile. "You'll have to speak up," he said, turning his head slightly. "I'm a bit deaf in this ear."

Aelius looked straight at him. "Of course you are," he said. "All right," he added, turning to the soldiers, "one of you on each entrance to the house, nobody comes in or out. You, go to the Senate House, speak to Minister Honorius Severus and bring him here." He turned back and asked Basso, "He's the head of the family, right?"

Basso nodded. "But I think you'll find the proper complainant would be this man's wife. My sister," he added. "Fausta Tranquillina Carausia. I imagine she'll be at the Carausius house on the Horn; if not, they'll know where to find her."

Aelius nodded. "You know your law," he said. "What about her? Her father?"

"Aulus Licinius," Basso replied. "But he has no standing, it was a strict form marriage. So I guess you're right, the proper person to file a complaint

would be the head of our family, my father.”

“Fine,” Aelius said. “Right, you heard him. You, fetch the Minister. You, go back to the guardhouse and get a messenger sent to the Carausius house at the Horn.” He frowned, then asked Basso, “What was that name again?”

“Fausta Tranquillina Carausia,” Basso said slowly. “Shall I write it down?”

Aelius shrugged. “Might be as well,” he said. “All right, you, go downstairs and find an inkwell and something to write on. Ask a servant or something. That’s all.”

The soldiers left quickly. When they’d gone, Aelius closed the door. “So,” he said, “what happened?”

Basso told him. He pointed out the toy dagger, lying on the floor, and showed Aelius his hand.

“I see. And what about her?”

Basso shook his head. “That’s my business. At least, I suppose it’s between me and my sister.”

“I remember her,” Aelius said. “You beat up a soldier for looking at her.”

“Something like that.” Suddenly Basso felt very tired. He sat down. Aelius shrugged, and sat down on the bed. “So, it’s major now, is it?” said Basso.

“Six months ago,” Aelius replied.

“Impressive, a man of your age.”

“You run the bank, don’t you?”

Basso nodded. “Family business,” he said. “The clerks run it, I just sit in a chair and sign letters.”

“Is it true,” Aelius asked, “you’re deaf in that ear?”

“Yes.”

“But you never raised a complaint.”

“Nothing to complain about.”

Aelius was quite still for a moment. Then he cleared his throat and said, “I’ll need everything left as it is until I’ve written up a formal deposition. It’ll go on file, but it’ll be restricted, unless a complaint is made.” He paused, then asked quietly, almost gently: “Is that likely?”

Basso smiled. “No,” he said.

“In that case...” Aelius was looking away now, not at Basso, not at the bodies or the blood. “If there’s no complaint, it’s a family matter and none of our business. You don’t want to make any further statements.” He stood up. “Is there somewhere I can use to write my report?”

Basso said, “Shouldn’t you wait till my sister gets here?”

“Yes,” Aelius said. “But what the hell.” He stood up. “You might as well get started on your arrangements. I’ve seen everything I need here, and you’ve been very cooperative.”

Basso nodded his thanks. “I’ll show you to the library,” he said. “You can use that.”

At that moment a soldier reappeared, clutching an inkwell, a pen and a scrap of cheese-wrapping. Basso wrote down his sister’s name and address and gave it to him, and he left quickly.

* * *

No complaints were filed. Some time later, his father said to him, “You did the right thing.”

Basso wasn’t sure he agreed, but he didn’t like to contradict his father. “The trust fund,” he said. “I guess that comes to us now, till Bassano turns eighteen.”

Father frowned. “I hadn’t thought of that,” he said. He was an indifferent liar.

Three

Basso's father died on the day of the election. He suffered a massive stroke in the middle of a shouting match with Ulpus Lorica on the steps of the New Reform Temple (the only time, Lorica said afterwards, that Elio had ever won an argument with him, adding that at least he'd have died happy). Given the dramatic nature of the election, it's likely that he died believing his son was about to lose, and he missed the unforgettable midnight scene in the House when the final result was brought in: Bassianus Arcadius Severus, by seventy-one wards to sixty-eight.

The death of the elder Severus would have been the talking point of the City under any other circumstances; as it was, it was noted in passing and hardly discussed. The events of that day—the outrageous pageantry of the twins' coming-of-age ceremony in the morning, the extraordinary scenes attending the Charity & Social Justice's hostile takeover of the Merchants' Benevolent Fund, followed by the vote itself, with its attendant riot and the unprecedented deployment of troops inside the City walls to restore order, culminating in Vipsanius Severus' death and the astounding denouement in the House—left the City too emotionally exhausted to react with anything more than stunned acquiescence when the King's envoy arrived with the news that the peace proposals had been rejected and accordingly the Vesani Republic was now at war with Scleria.

Under the circumstances, the new First Citizen would have been forgiven for not attending the House the next morning. But he was there, magnificent in purple and gold mourning robes that must have been designed, fitted and sewn in a matter of hours, to deliver a sombre but

defiant reply to the King which most commentators place among his finest speeches. He said that in the three hundred years since the Republic had won its freedom, it had always gone out of its way to respect the King's interests; the citizens of the Republic regarded Scleria as a parent with whom they had had occasion to quarrel bitterly, but that they had always remembered where they came from and what had made them what they were: Sclerian justice and wisdom, Sclerian civilisation and institutions, the Sclerian dream of a better, fairer society; in a word, Sclerian freedom. If that love of freedom had withered in the mother country, it was the duty of its estranged but still loving offspring to remind her of what she had once been, and what she could be again.

Basso left the House with a headache, brought on by the dreadful noise of shouting and cheering in the bell-like acoustic of the debating chamber. He hadn't touched a drop for a week but he felt like he had the worst hangover of his life: splitting head, raging indigestion, nausea and an appalling mental numbness, the feeling of being temporarily but intolerably stupid. He collapsed into his seat in the covered coach and scrabbled for the blinds, unable to cope with the sight of the solid, howling wall of his fellow citizens, yelling his name and scrabbling at him with their outstretched hands. His mind felt like porridge, and he tried in vain to remember what he'd just said to the Sclerians. Given the situation, he was fairly sure he hadn't made matters worse (that would be impossible), but he had no idea whether he'd just made a fool of himself in public or not. A hell of a way, he decided, to celebrate his fortieth birthday.

Antigonus was waiting for him in the lobby. "Am I glad to see you," Basso said, stumbling on the threshold and barging the old man's shoulder. Then he saw the expression on Antigonus' face. "What?" he said. "Not something else, for God's sake."

"Your sister's here," Antigonus said quietly.

"Wonderful." Basso stuck out a hand and steadied himself against a pillar. "All right, I'd better see her. Can you...?"

Antigonus nodded. "All being taken care of. The twins are in temple, your mother's in her room and doesn't want to see anybody, I'm meeting the Patriarch's office in an hour to discuss the funeral, followed by the Merchants' Benevolent board at noon and your cabinet at three, so you're

clear till the inauguration rehearsal at six.” He smiled. “Enjoy your day off,” he said. “Tomorrow you’ll wish you’d never been born.”

Basso nodded. “Thanks,” he said.

Antigonus did that nod-bow thing, half ironic, half sincere. “I live to serve, as we used to say in the slate quarries.”

Basso laughed. “When the hell were you ever in a slate quarry?”

“Actually, I visited one once. Interesting, but you wouldn’t want to work there. Go on,” he said, “I’ll take care of things.”

Basso pushed open the front door, then stopped. “Where’s Bassano?” he asked.

“Music lesson,” Antigonus replied, “followed by double rhetoric, fencing and lunch. Routine is the best anaesthetic, in my opinion. Do you want to see him?”

Basso nodded. “But later,” he said, “after I’ve seen Lina. Good work,” he added, “I’m obliged to you.”

“I know,” Antigonus replied, and Basso walked through into the hall.

He looked up at the middle gallery, still garlanded from the twins’ reception, and thought, I feel like a stranger in my own house. That was an uneasy feeling, because now it really was his own house, its previous owner having just died. He didn’t want to climb the stairs; he didn’t have the energy. If Antigonus was any good, he’d have arranged for a doctor.

A man he didn’t know appeared from the west wing door, holding a blue glass. “Drink this,” he said, “you’ll feel better.”

“Who the hell are you?”

The man (long black beard and the cleanest fingernails Basso had ever seen in his life) bowed efficiently. “Nestor Antimachus,” he said, “president of the Grand College of Surgeons. It’s just a basic tonic.”

Oh, Basso thought. He drank the contents of the glass, which tasted like something from his mother’s collection, and felt as though someone was squeezing his head in a giant pair of tongs. Then, as promised, he felt much better. “Thanks,” he said. “You’re hired.”

“I’m not available,” the doctor said, took the glass from his hand and walked away. Basso scowled, then decided not to worry about it. His head was still hurting, but at least he could think.

She was in her sitting room on the third floor, perched on the edge of the window seat, with a book open on her lap: a picture of something,

Basso thought, by a good but not great artist. She looked up as he opened the door, then turned away.

“So you’re here, are you?” she said.

“I live here,” he replied.

“I’m moving out,” she said to the window. “I’ll need furniture and bedlinen, and you’ll have to pay me a regular allowance.”

He decided not to say anything, and after a moment or so she went on: “I’m going to have the lodge at Curcuas. It’s plenty big enough, and you never use it for anything. I want it made over into my name.”

“Why Curcuas?”

“It’s a long way from the City. Less chance of meeting you there.”

He thought for a few seconds. “There’s also the house at Simisca,” he said. “That’s even further away.”

“No it isn’t.”

“I think you’ll find it is,” he said. “You can measure it out on a map if you like.”

“It’s too big,” she said sharply. “If I’m going to have to live on a fixed income, I don’t want to have to pay a fortune staffing and heating a great big barn when there’ll just be the two of us living there, and half a dozen servants.”

The two of them. “Bassano’s going with you, is he?”

“He’s not staying here.” She’d turned her face round so far he could only see the curve of her cheek. “In two years’ time, of course, he can do whatever he likes. Till then, he’ll come with me.”

Basso came into the room and sat down. “Have you thought about that?” he said. “For one thing, there’s his education.”

“There’ll be room for his tutors at Curcuas,” she replied. “There’s the three estate cottages in the grounds, or I’ll make room for them in the house.”

“Yes, but that’s not what I meant.” It was a ferocious effort to keep his voice quiet and even. “Do you really think it’s fair on him, stranding him out in the country at his age? What about his friends?”

“They can visit,” Lina said, in her end-of-discussion voice. “And it’s not like it’s in the middle of the desert. He can come into town if he wants to.” She paused, judging her timing nicely, then added, “He can stay at the Licinius house, or with a friend.”

Basso breathed in slowly. "I don't think it'd be a good idea," he said. "And what about you? There's your friends. You always hated the country."

"Fine," she snapped. "Then buy me somewhere in town, for when I get sick of Curcuas. Just promise me you'll stay away."

He closed his eyes. Normally it helped him concentrate, but his mind was numb again, stupid. "Will you think about it some more?" he said. "Please?"

"No." She picked up the book, marked the place with a length of red cord, and stood up. "Your man Antigonus can make the arrangements," she said. "Let me know how much money I can have. Please don't be generous," she added. "I'd rather not take anything at all, but I haven't really got much choice." Now she turned and faced him, and he looked away. "I don't want you to give Bassano any money," she said. "I'll pay for him till he comes of age, and then he'll have the trust money, assuming you haven't spent it all. You haven't, have you?"

"No, of course not." Which was perfectly true. It was Father who'd lost the entire capital, buying into a trading consortium on the point of bankruptcy; competing with his son, as always. But a sum like that was small change to Basso these days. "I suppose you'll want to see the accounts next."

"Yes, please. I want Bassano to know it was his father's money, and nothing to do with you." She walked straight at him, making him give ground so she could pass through the doorway. "Send Antigonus to tell me the arrangements," she said. "Don't come and see me yourself."

He heard the hem of her skirt rustle on the stairs. Chasing after her would probably just make matters worse; so did everything he said or did. Without realising he was doing it, he rubbed his right thumb up and down the scars across his left palm, tracing the smooth raised line of the damage.

Three days of making speeches, government stuff; getting rid of people who'd helped him win the election, because they were dangerous; making peace with those of his enemies who he knew were more capable than his own people in their various specialities; paying off political debts with appointments, honours and Treasury contracts; struggling into the mind of his predecessor (like trying to put on shoes three sizes too small).

Fortunately, Caelius had assumed he'd be re-elected, and so hadn't made a ghastly, poisonous mess of the administrative and operational systems, with a view to making life interesting for his conqueror. Small mercies.

On the fourth day, the funeral; and in the afternoon, the deputy assistant commissioner of the Guard asked to see him. When he saw the man's name, he sent for him at once.

"I'm resigning my commission," Aelius said. He was standing to attention, which was ridiculous, since there was nobody else but Basso in the room, and Basso wasn't a soldier.

"Sit down," Basso replied. "Have a drink."

"No, thank you."

"Fine." Basso stood up, crossed to the table in the corner of the room and poured himself a glass of water. "You can't resign," he said, turning his back on Aelius. "You've still got nine months of your term to run, and I won't let you go early."

"I'd have thought—"

"Why?"

"Why?" Aelius repeated. "Well, let's see. Because of me, you're deaf in one ear. I was the investigating officer when you killed your wife and her lover, and in my report I recommended a state prosecution. I led the Guard unit that broke up the riot started by your supporters on election day, and my men killed over a hundred of them, quite probably illegally. All things considered—"

"Be quiet," Basso said, and turned to face him. "And for crying out loud sit down." Aelius opened his mouth, thought better of whatever it was he was about to say, and sat down. "Thank you," Basso continued, and perched on the edge of the desk. "Now, then. First, I've probably got you to thank for winning the election. I don't know what possessed Caelius to break the law and send in the troops like that, but it was about the only thing he could've done to make himself lose. A lot of men in your position would've questioned the order. Just out of interest, why didn't you?"

Aelius shrugged. "There was a riot going on," he said. "They were setting fire to buildings, the whole of the south quarter could've gone up. We tried to be nice about it, and they killed two of my men. Naturally, I take full responsibility for what happened after that."

Basso nodded. "Moving on," he said, "in your report you said I probably killed my brother-in-law in self-defence, but in your view killing my wife was murder."

Aelius waited for a moment, then said, "And?"

Basso smiled. "You were quite right," he said. "You went on to say that since, in law, any complaint would have to be lodged by my sister, who's under my control, the interests of justice demanded a state prosecution. You must've felt quite strongly about it to stick your neck out like that."

"Yes."

"Finally," Basso said, touching his left ear with his fingertips, "there's this. About which, all I have to say is that you taught me a valuable lesson which I've never forgotten. The fourth infantry division needs a new commander. I'm giving it to you."

Aelius stared at him. "You're joking," he said.

Basso frowned; a mild rebuke. "I've had you researched," he said, picking up a sheet of paper. "You're fifty-one years old, born in a wooden hut in Beroea, father unknown, mother died when you were six; recruited at fifteen, commissioned lieutenant at eighteen, captain by the time you were twenty-one." He turned the paper over. "Served with distinction—well, you know all that." He folded the paper in half and dropped it in the scraping-tray. "Well? Do you want the job or not?"

"You know I do," Aelius said.

"You're sure about that?" Basso stood up, went round the desk and sat in his chair. "Maybe you hadn't heard, we're at war with Scleria. Perhaps I'm sending you to the front to get killed."

Aelius grinned. "You can't drown a fish in water," he said. "But I can't do it. I haven't got the experience."

Basso shook his head. "Experience is a myth," he said. "I was put in charge of the Bank after a few weeks sitting in with the chief clerk. You'll do just fine."

"All right," Aelius said. "Provided you tell me why."

From his pocket, Basso took his gold-handled penknife and started trimming the nib of his pen. It was sharp enough already. "I want this ridiculous war over as soon as possible," he said. "I don't care whether we win or not, just so long as we don't lose in a way anybody will notice. I want it off my desk. General Basiliscus, on the other hand, wants a

comprehensive victory. He wants a campaign they'll teach at the military academy for the next thousand years. Do you see where there might be a conflict of interests?"

"Basiliscus is a military genius."

"Quite," Basso replied. "And Scleria's the only truly worthy opponent he's ever likely to face. For him, it's the opportunity of a lifetime. Which is why I'm bringing him home. He can be the new City prefect, where he can't do any damage. The way I see it, you don't hire an icon-painter to whitewash a wall. Besides, if you screw it up, I'll send him out to replace you and he'll love that. Now, is that a good enough explanation?"

There was a confused look on Aelius' face that Basso found mildly entertaining. "I suppose it has to be," he said. "Thank you, Arcadius Severus, I'm honoured."

"Yes," Basso replied. "Now salute and go away. You interrupted me, remember?"

* * *

"What on earth possessed you...?"

Basso frowned, and poured Antigonus a glass of wine. "Oh come on," he said. "Think about it."

"I have been," Antigonus replied. "And I'm afraid I don't see it. Basiliscus..."

Basso leaned forward, picked a book up off the desk and lobbed it at Antigonus, who caught it clumsily. "Amandus' *History of the Wars*," he said. "They made me read it when I was a kid. Open it at random and you'll see where I've drawn sea serpents in the margins. It's a very dull book," he went on, leaning back in his chair. "The same thing happens, over and over again. A great general arises in the Republic's hour of greatest need. He defeats the enemy, and his loyal troops, who worship the ground he treads on, demand that he leads them against the wicked and corrupt administration back home and sets the Republic free. A few years later, the same thing happens. We had seventy-three military dictators in a hundred years. It was awfully bad for business."

Antigonus smiled. "That was a long time ago."

“So?” Basso shrugged. “Just because it rained a thousand years ago doesn’t mean it won’t rain tomorrow. Basiliscus isn’t just a soldier, he’s a hero. I can’t take the risk. General Aelius, on the other hand, is a barely house-broken Beroean with a knack for doing the right thing. He’ll end the war and we can get back to normal. That’s what sensible people do with wars. They put a stop to them.” He yawned. “Can we talk about something else now?” he said. “War’s just violence, and violence is an admission of failure. I don’t like thinking about it.”

Antigonus handed back the book. “If that’s what you want,” he said. “Now then, what else? Oh yes. Your sister’s found a house she likes in town.”

Basso turned his head and looked out of the window. Across the square from the Bank, the absurdly long, narrow windows of the Notaries’ Hall were lit up and golden, their light reflected in the water of the fountain below. “They must be having a function of some sort,” he said.

“Inscription Day,” Antigonus said. “Big occasion. Shouldn’t you be there?”

“I don’t know. Should I?”

“Affairs of state,” Antigonus replied. “Unavoidably detained. It’s a pretty dull affair, actually. Each newly registered notary has his name called out, and he stands up while they write his name on the roll. I suppose it’d be all right if you’re a proud father.”

“That’s it?”

“More or less. There’s speeches too, of course.”

“Anything political?”

“From the notaries? I’d be greatly surprised.”

Basso nodded. “Where?” he asked.

“Lower town,” Antigonus said. “Nice quiet square, just round the corner from the Victory Temple. You paid eight thousand for it.”

Basso opened his eyes wide, then shrugged. “Big enough for both of them?”

“Comfortable. Comfortable without being snug.”

“Fine.” Basso closed his eyes. Long gold streaks blazed across the inside of his eyelids. “Furniture?”

“Nothing from the town house. Two dozen pieces from store, and she’ll buy the rest new. I offered her extra money to cover that, but she refused.”

“And?”

Antigonus paused. “Her exact words were, ‘Tell him not to come. It’d be embarrassing, the First Citizen locked out on the pavement by his own sister.’ ”

“Considerate of her,” Basso said quietly. “Oh well.” He was fiddling with something, but keeping it hidden in his hand. A flash of gold told Antigonus it was the penknife. “Let’s have something cheerful,” he said. “How about the takeover? All done?”

“Mostly.” There was a slight feather to Antigonus’ voice. “Actually, there’s a problem.”

“Of course there is,” Basso sighed. “What?”

“Well.” Antigonus opened his document case and flicked through the papers inside. “There’s a government loan,” he said. “One they didn’t tell us about.”

“Shit,” Basso hissed through his teeth. “When?”

“That’s the interesting bit,” Antigonus said. “They’d been negotiating it for some time; Treasury, three hundred thousand at four per cent over twenty years, fixed rate.”

“You’re kidding.”

Antigonus shook his head. “Obviously they didn’t want to take it, but the Treasury was pressing them for it. Then, as soon as you made your raid and it looked like it was going to work, they agreed. According to the Treasury clerks, they dragged the permanent secretary out of bed in the middle of the night and he signed the memorandum right there, in his bedroom. And forgot to write it up the next morning.”

Basso sucked his lip. “Go on.”

“Which means,” Antigonus said, “technically you’re in breach, even though you didn’t actually know about it, and even though the loan was made before you acquired the bank. I say technically, but the code of conduct—”

“Can we prove they did it maliciously?”

Antigonus pursed his lips. “Demonstrate to anybody with half a brain, yes. Prove, no. The signed memorandum was on the Bank’s premises when we inspected the records. True, it was hidden in a closed file about a completely different matter down in the cellars, but that still makes it a

breach. It doesn't help, of course, that none of the Benevolent's clerks will testify to concealing it, for fear of winding up in court themselves."

Basso closed his eyes. "Who knows about it?"

"Ah." Antigonus steeped his fingers. "My guess is, if they did it on purpose to get back at you, they'll have told Caelius, and he'll be round at the Speaker's office right now, filing a complaint. After all, why go to all that trouble if they're not going to make the most of it to hurt you?"

Basso thought for a while. "When they did it," he said, "they had no way of knowing I was going to win the election. In fact, it was odds-on I'd lose. You sure it wasn't just a perfectly innocent bad business decision?"

Antigonus shrugged. "Could be," he said. "But if you were being bullied into making a truly awful deal, would you go and wake up the Treasury boss at midnight to get it signed?"

"True." Basso sighed. "All right," he said, "what can we do?"

He watched as Antigonus closed the case and put it on the floor. "I have no suggestions to make," he said. "Sorry."

"Oh." Basso sat up straight in his chair, his hands on the armrests, like an emperor on his throne. "In that case, this is what we'll do. Draft me a statement to the House. Say that when I took over the Benevolent I inadvertently bought government debt. Say I apologise unreservedly for my carelessness, which I deeply regret, and that as a gesture of good will I'm writing off the loan."

Antigonus' eyes widened. "You're joking."

"When I make jokes, they're funny," Basso replied. "There's not much to laugh about in losing three hundred thousand nomismata. But," he went on, letting his head droop forward, "if it's that or give Caelius grounds for impeachment, it's cheap at the price. And we can afford it, and you'll make absolutely sure that the true story gets put around." Suddenly he grinned. "And you've got to admit, it's a pretty magnificent gesture. It'll give Caelius heartburn for a day or so, if nothing else."

Antigonus smiled. "True," he said.

"Tell you what," Basso went on, "let's rub it in. Let them know that as far as we're concerned, three hundred thousand is just pocket money. Let's buy something."

"There are times," Antigonus said solemnly, "when you remind me of your father."

“Thank you,” Basso said. “No, really, it’s a compliment. He may have had the business sense of a small rock, but he understood gestures. I know,” he went on, “let’s buy a ship. Better still, let’s *build* some ships. Let’s start up a shipyard.”

“Basso...”

Basso didn’t smile, but he wanted to. Antigonus had used his short name twice, maybe three times, in all the years they’d known each other. “No, I’m serious, listen,” he said. “There’s the government yards, three big private builders and a few old men who make rowing boats. There’s no shortage of skilled labour we can poach from the government—they pay rubbish, and the conditions are primitive. Raw materials we can source ourselves, and bring them in on the Bank’s freighters, on the return trip from Escia. We’ve got bay-front land standing idle for a site. I’m surprised you didn’t think of it before.”

“Lax of me,” Antigonus said. “My apologies. Have you forgotten there’s a war on?”

“All the better. Once the Sclerians start sinking our freighters, we’ll have all the demand we can handle. You know,” he said, “this could be the best deal I ever make.”

Antigonus held his hands up. “If he was alive today, your father would be proud of you,” he said. “But there, if you’re dead set on it, I suppose it might work. I suppose there have been worse ideas in our nation’s long and illustrious history. Who do you want me to put on it?”

They discussed that for a while, reached agreement, and Antigonus said goodnight and went away. Basso reached out with his hand and snapped the lamp-flame between forefinger and thumb, extinguishing it. There was almost enough light to read by from the windows of the Notaries’ Hall across the street.

Shipbuilding, he thought: what on earth had possessed him to say that? He considered it for a moment. If a stranger had suggested it as an investment opportunity, would he have put money into it? The answer, all things being equal, would have to be yes. In fact, it was a stroke of genius; but he felt no pride or pleasure in it. He’d said, “let’s buy a ship”, because that was what his father had done once, and the rest had slipped out after it, like a lamb following its mother.

Lower town, near the Victory Temple. A long time since he'd been in lower town; before house prices started going up, and places where you wouldn't have gone after dark started to get expensive and fashionable. He pictured the Victory in his mind: a huge, stark white thing, built six hundred years ago, when lower town was the whole city, to commemorate some glorious feat of arms whose name he'd forgotten. Last time he was there, it reminded him of a beached ship, stranded and lost and out of context. Handy for the docks and the law courts, and that was about all you could say for it. And the fish market, of course, but Lina had never liked fish. He tried to remember what Bassano's views on fish were, but realised he didn't know.

He was sitting alone in the dark, which was ridiculous. He stood up and walked to the door, then became aware that he didn't know where he wanted to go. Home or his office in the House; his father had told him what a nuisance it was when you're the First Citizen, not being able to take a walk in the streets for fear of being recognised. Father, of course, had never walked a step if he could help it, and as for wandering the alleys and byways of the City, he'd just as soon have been eaten by bats. Presumably what he had in mind was not being able to walk from his front door to his carriage (they'd had to carry him those vulnerable ten yards in a sedan chair). The hell with it, Basso thought. His face wasn't on the money yet, surely nobody would recognise him. Then he thought about the dreaded Severus lower lip. Bassano hadn't inherited it, thank God; he took after his father as far as looks went. He thought about that, too.

Feeling mildly stupid, he went back to his desk and scrabbled about with the tinderbox to light the lamp. There was plenty of work to keep him occupied, which was just as well.

"Terico, you're the historian." Basso was keeping his temper very well.
"You tell him."

That man, Aelius thought, has no neck. How does he breathe? Or swallow food? "He's quite right," the neckless man said. "At one time it was standard procedure for the First Citizen to lead the army in the field. Back then, of course—"

“You see?” Basso said, moving his arm for a gesture and knocking over a wineglass. Fortunately it was empty. “Standard procedure. This isn’t just some whim, it’s my fucking duty.”

Aelius wasn’t impressed. “At one time,” he said. “What time would that be?”

“That’s got nothing—” Basso started to say, but Terico talked over him; without raising his voice, just a matter of emphasis and clarity. “The last recorded instance was at Nasencat,” he said. “Well over two hundred years ago.”

Aelius grinned. “Nasencat. Wasn’t that where we got wiped out by the Dalasseni?”

“Since then—” Terico started, but this time Basso raised his voice. “Cowardice, that’s all it is,” he said. “Cowardice and laziness. My illustrious predecessors didn’t want to get killed, and they didn’t want to have to sleep in a tent. That’s not a good enough reason, if you ask me.”

Aelius didn’t answer. Instead, he gave Terico a long, deliberate stare. The historian had no trouble understanding. “I think I’d better be going now,” he said, standing up. “I need to—”

“Terico, stay where you are.”

“No, really.” Terico reached for his document case. “Call of nature,” he added, and Basso decided he probably wasn’t lying about that.

“Now, then,” Aelius said, when they were alone. “What the hell is all this about?”

Basso scowled at him. “There’s a war on,” he said. “I’ve given the matter serious thought, and I feel my place is at the front.”

“Balls,” Aelius said, and waited patiently while Basso pretended to be angry. “So,” he went on, “what’s the reason?”

Basso smiled at him; a huge, warm, good-natured grin. “All right,” he said. “I give in.” He paused, as though he’d suddenly realised what he’d just said. “You know,” he went on, “I’m going to have all sorts of trouble with you. That’s not good. The First Citizen shouldn’t let himself be shoved around by the military.”

Aelius looked at him calmly. “I think that’s why you chose me,” he said.

“Sorry?” Basso cupped his hand to his left ear. “Didn’t quite catch that.”

“It must’ve been tough on you,” Aelius went on. “There you were, a kid, barely started shaving, and your father dumps running the Bank on you.

But you cope. In ten minutes flat you've got the hang of it, and ten minutes after that you're a merchant prince, beating the best in the Republic."

"I had help."

"I know." Aelius nodded. "Your man Antigonus. Probably the only man in the world you actually respect. Tell me," he went on, "if you wanted to do something and Antigonus said no, would you listen to him?"

Basso frowned, as though the question didn't make sense. "It'd depend."

"On what?"

"Whether he was right."

Aelius laughed. "In other words, no. Even Antigonus." He touched the point of his beard with his left thumb. "I think that's because he was a slave."

"Bullshit."

"It's true," Aelius said quietly. "That's why you can't respect him. You realise he's very clever, very good indeed at what he does. You love him like he was a close relative—uncle or something, maybe even your father—but deep down inside, you can't help despising him because of what he was. Well?"

Basso's scowl flattened out a little. "Your point?"

Aelius nodded. "Me," he said, "I'm a foreigner. 'Barely house-broken Beroean', you once called me."

"How the hell did you know that?"

Aelius shrugged. "Antigonus didn't tell me," he said. "But I'm the man who made you deaf in one ear and got away with it. I was the man who wanted you to hang for killing your wife." He paused, as if issuing a challenge. "Well?"

"Your point?"

"Very well." Aelius seemed to untense a little. "You want to go and take charge of the war, personally. Fine. I'm saying no to you. Well?"

Basso closed his eyes, then opened them again. "Don't you want to know why I'm so keen to do this?"

"I know why," Aelius replied. "Partly, you don't trust anybody else to do a proper job; not me, not anybody, not in anything. You want the war over and done with as soon as possible. Sitting back here and waiting for news will have you biting your nails to the quick."

“True,” Basso said. “But that’s—”

“Second,” Aelius went on, “it’s something you haven’t tried yet. In fact, it’s about the only thing you haven’t yet tried to do, done, done brilliantly well. In your mind you can see yourself winning the war in ten minutes flat.”

“No false modesty,” Basso said quietly. “I believe I probably could.”

“You’ve read a book about it, you mean.”

“I read a book about banking. Also, you’d be there to teach me. Like Antigonus taught me about business.”

Aelius shook his head. “It’s a little different,” he said. “Not that I’m saying you couldn’t do it. The difference is, if you get it wrong, a lot of men will get killed.”

“All right,” Basso said. “What’s so different about you? You read a better book than me, or what?”

Aelius smiled. “Actually, I’ve read forty-seven books,” he replied. “And attended four courses of lectures at the Academy, and you could say I’ve been apprenticed to masters of my craft for thirty-five years. Which means nothing,” he added. “Biggest defeat in the history of your Republic: the Danzine Forks. General Carus Vetrano and sixty thousand highly trained professional soldiers wiped out by a bunch of farmers led by a blacksmith. Teudel was, of course, a military genius. We spent a term on him, studying his use of mobile reserves and his innovative approach to the support of supply lines, and he couldn’t even write his name. When he was Emperor, he had to sign documents with a stencil. You could be another Teudel, I don’t know.”

Basso nodded. “In other words?” he said.

Aelius dipped his head, conceding the point. “You want to go to war so you can get away from the City,” he said. “Simple as that. You want to put as much geography as you can between yourself and your sister.”

“Yes,” Basso said. “So what’s wrong with that?”

Aelius sighed. “Nothing,” he said. “In your shoes, I’d think the same way. But I don’t want you in my war. You’d be a distraction. You’d interfere.” He breathed out, and seemed to shrink a little. “The one thing you’ve got to do in a war,” he said, “is give your general a little bit of room to make his mistakes in. It’s inevitable,” he went on. “All generals make mistakes, it simply can’t be prevented. But when they’ve got the boss there

right on top of them, breathing down their necks, it's too much pressure. You try too hard to be perfect, and that's how disasters happen. I'm sorry," he said, "but no. You can't come. You have to stay here."

So Basso stayed; and within a month, Aelius smashed the Sclerian land army at Drepana, captured the King's uncle and won a convincing naval victory in the Strait of Jeano, bottling up what was left of the Sclerian fleet in their home port. Two days after the report reached the City, the Severus shipyard launched its first warship; supplied to the government at cost, better specified than the products of the state yards and twenty per cent cheaper. Announcing this development, the First Citizen told the House that his yard would be operating at full capacity within six weeks, at which time he pledged to deliver one warship, fully equipped and seaworthy, every day for as long as necessary.

During the course of the subsequent negotiations, sources close to the King let it be known that it was the Republic's new shipbuilding programme, as much as the land and sea defeats, that had influenced the Sclerians to seek peace. The King's admirals, they said, would have no trouble sinking the Republic's ships the next time they met, but if they could be replaced so quickly, what would be the point? The royal yards, by contrast, were hopelessly inefficient, staffed by indolent drunkards, run by the labour guilds rather than the supervisors, and managed by aristocratic favourites who never left their country estates. In fact (the sources hinted carefully), once a solid and dependable peace had been established, the King might well be interested in placing a substantial order with the Severus yard, with a view to establishing a lasting trading relationship.

He was almost tempted to recall General Aelius. The Republic's finest tactical thinker, he reasoned, was probably the only man capable of working out a plan whereby the First Citizen (who never left home without an honour guard, his personal staff and half a dozen personal attendants) could accidentally bump into his nephew in the street without closing off half the streets in the city. In Antigonus' considered opinion, it simply couldn't be done. The highways commissioner held that it was possible, but only if Basso was prepared to breach the west aqueduct and flood the Drapers'

Quarter. Macrinus the City Prefect offered to have Bassano arrested, so his uncle could drop by to visit him in jail.

In the end Basso gave up and sent for him.

“Uncle Basso,” said Basso. “I haven’t seen you in ages. But I guess you’ve been busy.”

Basso looked at him. No trace of the Severus lip. Instead, he’d grown up slight and thin (all the Severi ended up tall and stocky, but Bassano only came up to his shoulder), with straight black hair which he had the good taste to let grow, and his mother’s light brown eyes. He looked boyish, but older than he actually was, and he had long, good-sized hands rather than the dumpy little Severus paws. According to the reports he was a fine dancer, an outstanding fencer, naturally talented on the lute, harp and rebec, a more than competent draughtsman and painter, and he wrote elegant, witty, contained poetry, usually in the form of letters to friends. So far, to Basso’s great relief, he’d shown no interest whatsoever in horses.

“That’s right,” Basso said. “I’ve neglected you, and I’m sorry. Sit down, let me get you a drink.”

Bassano sat. “Not for me,” he said. “Wine gives me a headache.” He smiled. “They keep telling me it’s an acquired taste, but I can’t see why anyone would bother.” He flicked his fringe away from his eyes; a deliberate mannerism, Basso decided, that had escaped from captivity and become unconscious. “So,” he said, “what did you want to see me about?”

“Bassano.” The First Citizen stopped there. It was a rule of his, when making an important speech, always to have the next sentence prepared in his mind while he was speaking. If he couldn’t, he paused, and tried to make it seem like he was doing it on purpose. “We’ve never really talked,” he said (it sounded all wrong). “About your father.”

Bassano looked at him. “Well, understandably,” he said.

Basso had always had the knack of knowing when he was doing something completely misguided and stupid, though only once he’d embarked on it, and it was too late to turn back. “Maybe we ought to,” he said. “I mean, it’s not something we can just ignore. Especially—”

“I’d really rather not,” Bassano said, “if you don’t mind.” He turned his head away and addressed the curtained window. “I think the town house is going to be a great success,” he said. “Of course, so much depends on

getting the basic colour scheme right *before* you start choosing furniture. Doing it the other way round's just asking for trouble."

"Bassano—"

"And how are the twins?" He was pushing with his head, straining against an imaginary rope. "The last time I saw them was at the Midsummer ball. Is Festo still mad about cockfighting? It was all he could talk about at one time."

It was like tripping over something small when you're running flat out. "Cockfighting?"

"Good heavens, you're not supposed to know. Forget I said anything."

"No, it's all right." Basso frowned. "Since when?"

Bassano grinned feebly. "I gather it was one of your coachmen who got him started on it. They used to sneak out at night and go to the fights at the racecourse. Festo said he'd made a lot of money betting. Chip off the old block, you might say."

"Cockfighting?"

"I know." Bassano shrugged. "Never could see anything in it myself. All that noise, and people shouting; mostly people who don't smell very nice, with fat stomachs and missing teeth. I imagine that's what Festo likes about it; so different from what he's used to."

Basso was quiet for a moment. "You've been with him, then."

Bassano nodded. "Just the once," he said, "that was plenty for me. There was this little skinny thing, like a stretched bantam, and they put it up against this huge redpoll. I put a nomisma on the redpoll, naturally, but Festo put ten on the skinny object, at twenty to one. I think the fight only lasted a minute, and then there were red feathers everywhere and bits of raw chicken, and the skinny bird didn't have a mark on it, apart from the other bird's blood. Two hundred nomismata," Bassano added with a sigh, "one of them mine, if you like to look at it in those terms. You're not going to get nasty with him about it, are you?"

Basso laughed. "When I was Festo's age," he said, "I used to go to the prizefights down on the docks."

"You're joking."

"Quite true. You paid sixpence to get in, and a quarter if you wanted to fight. It was all quite organised, there were even rudimentary weight classes. I was a featherweight, naturally."

“You *fought*?”

“That,” Basso said coldly, “could be interpreted as an insult. Of course I fought. I never could see the sense in just watching anything.”

Bassano was staring at him, eyes wide. “So what happened? How did you do?”

“I got bashed silly, of course,” Basso replied. “The first time, and the second, and the third. The fourth time I made it through to the third round, and the fifth time, I won. Fifteen nomismata, first money I ever earned. I fought an apprentice from the rope-walk; big lad, very fast, but no footwork. They had to carry him out on a door.”

“Is that true?”

Basso nodded. “As a matter of fact, yes, it is. I think Antigonus knew about it, but Father didn’t have a clue. He thought I’d got the bruises from falling down the stairs. Of course,” Basso added, “I had to fall down the stairs to make it plausible. Scariest thing I’ve ever done, actually. So,” he went on, “if Festo wants to go to the cockfights, good luck to him, and I’m delighted it’s nothing worse. I’m just surprised at his choice of vice, that’s all.”

“Sorry?”

Basso shrugged. “Like you said,” he replied, “it’s so...” He made a words-fail-me gesture. “So commonplace. No, that’s not what I mean. So uninspiring.”

Bassano raised an eyebrow. “As opposed to, say, prizefighting.”

“Well, of course. You go along, you watch poultry kicking shit out of each other, you come away. Big deal. With prizefighting, you’re taking part, you’re involved. Still,” he added, “I’m glad he’s winning money. At least that suggests he’s got a good eye.”

Bassano had been staring at him; suddenly he burst out laughing. “Festo was sure that if you found out, you’d break his neck. Pio’s livid with him about it, keeps telling him not to be such a bloody fool.”

“Ah well.” Basso sighed. “I think what I’ll have to do is organise a national cockfighting championship,” he said. “Not a bad idea in itself. The people of this city are mad about sports, and I haven’t done much yet to show I’ve got the common touch. Messano was nagging me about it only the other day. The Chancellor,” Basso explained. “I can see you follow current affairs.”

“Sorry.” Bassano cringed. “Not my thing, politics.”

“Very wise. Anyhow, we’ll have this championship, and I’ll make the twins come and sit with me in the presidential box for the grand finals. It’d be worth it just to see the look on their faces.”

He leaned back in his chair. Bassano was grinning, and for a moment he caught a resemblance to something he’d seen in a mirror once, a long time ago; but without the comic eyebrows or the absurd lower lip. “There now,” he said, “you were right. So much more fun than talking about your father.”

Bassano’s grin faded. “Yes,” he said. “So I suppose we’d better. Do you play chess, Uncle Basso?”

“Chess? No.”

“I’m surprised. I’d have thought you’d be good at it.”

Basso couldn’t resist. “I am,” he said. “That’s why I don’t play. It’s a rule of mine: don’t beat people unless you have to.”

Bassano nodded. “Good rule,” he said. “Does the same go for killing people?”

“Always.” Basso wanted to look away, but didn’t. “Unless you have to.”

“Quite.” Bassano seemed to lose his energy. His hands dropped to his knees, and his neck bent. “Actually, I’ve found out quite a bit about my father; enough to make me wish I hadn’t. People say he was good-looking, but apart from that...” He shrugged. “Oh, and he was good with horses. I don’t take after him in that respect.”

“Horrible animals,” Basso said. “Actually, he did have his good points. He could be charming, he was generous, he didn’t bear grudges. Also, he could do the most amazing tricks with a coin and a handkerchief.”

Bassano looked up. “I remember that,” he said. “When I was very young, he showed me one once. I was terrified, I thought he was a wizard.” He shook his head. “I don’t remember him much at all. He was never there, and when he was, he was drunk or in a temper, so Mother kept him away from me. I didn’t like him much. He had a funny smell.”

“Really?”

Bassano nodded. “Like oranges,” he said, “only a bit sickly-sweet. I don’t know, maybe it was some stuff he put on his hair, or something they put in when they washed his clothes. It always made me feel uncomfortable. And he used to wear a big gold ring on his left hand, with a

stone that stuck out, and when he hugged me when I was small, it used to dig into my ear. Strange,” he added, “stupid things you remember.”

“I don’t remember any smell,” Basso said. “But I remember the ring. He sold it, or pawned it.”

“He used to pawn Mother’s jewellery. She’d notice and shout at him, and he’d just laugh. Didn’t give a damn if the servants heard.” Bassano reached across the table, took a goose-quill pen from the inkwell and started pulling the vanes out, one by one. “She always forgave him, though. At least, that’s what the housemaids told me. They’ve been with us since I was a kid.”

Basso looked at him. “Do you think your mother will ever forgive me?”

“No.” Bassano put down the shredded pen. “She really loved him. Hasn’t even looked at anyone else since he died, so they reckon.”

“In spite of what he was like? My wife wasn’t the first, not by a long way.”

“Oh, she knew.” Bassano rubbed his eyes, as though he was tired. “She told one of her friends once—I was listening at the door, so I can vouch for this—she said that his messing around just made him more interesting. That’s the word she used, interesting. As though he was some problem she’d set her heart on solving.”

Basso let his head droop forward. “She was genuinely talented at mathematics when she was young,” he said. “Did she ever tell you? My father hired a special tutor, even though she was never going to do anything with it, obviously. She could look at a column of numbers and tell you what they added up to faster than you or I could read them.”

“I never knew that,” Bassano said. “She doesn’t do anything like that now.”

“I was bitterly jealous,” Basso said, with a smile. “I never managed to learn the twelve-times table.”

“I think I’d like that glass of wine, if that’s all right.” Bassano waited for a nod of approval, then crossed the room and poured out two glasses. “It’s a terrible thing to admit,” he said, “but I know next to nothing about Mother. I know more about my father, come to think of it. I suppose you don’t think about someone very much if you see them every day.”

“Let me see.” Basso took the glass, pretended to sip it and put it down. “When she was a girl, your mother was rather a serious person. Oh, she had

a sense of humour, but I believe that if she could've swapped it for a pony, say, or better still, a complete set of Strymon's *Digest*, she wouldn't have hesitated for a second. She was always a perfectionist, and she was never patient; if she couldn't do a thing perfectly the first time, she couldn't be bothered with it. She had a natural gift for music—playing instruments, I mean—but as far as she was concerned, music was just a noise that served no useful purpose.” He laughed. “Me, all I can do with a lute is cut my fingers on the strings. I'd have loved to be able to play something.”

“That's weird,” Bassano said. “She always told me she never learned.”

Basso shrugged. “She'd get to the point where she was technically perfect, and then when she played for people, she could tell they weren't enjoying it. There was no feeling in it, you see. Listening to her was like watching a play where the actors are foreign and don't actually understand what they're saying. The only one who ever genuinely liked listening to her was Father; your grandfather, I mean. He didn't know a thing about music; it all went straight over his head like the swallows flying south. But he loved the fact that his daughter was good at it.”

Suddenly, Bassano smiled. “You like talking about her.”

“She's the person I love most in the world,” Basso replied.

The cockfighting tournament was an outstanding success. The First Citizen's approval ratings soared, and Antigonus calculated that the revenue from ticket sales was enough to pay for replacements for the seventeen warships that had been lost in the Sclerian War. When Bassianus Severus took his seat in the Arena for the finals, accompanied by his two young sons and leading politicians of both parties, the roar that went up from the crowd was audible in Coronea, five miles away.

“Now then,” Basso said, when the noise had died down a bit and they could hear themselves think. “Festo, you'd better come and sit here next to me, where I can hear you. I need you to make my selections for me.”

Festo went white as a sheet. “Me?”

“Of course you,” Basso said. “I'm betting a lot of money today, so the people will know what a good sport I am, and I know bugger-all about chicken-fighting. So, what do you reckon for the first round?”

Festo looked at his brother, who looked away. “Honestly, Dad, I don’t know the first thing...”

“Liar.” Basso smiled at him. “Why, only last week you won a hundred and seventy nomismata betting on Spoildriver at the Horn, at seven to one. You practically never lose, so I gather. So, the least you can do is help your old man pick a few winners.”

Pio said something, but he was on Basso’s deaf side and he didn’t catch it. “Festo,” Basso said, “you’ll mark this card for me, and if any of your picks loses, you’ll pay me back what I’ve lost, double. And then, if I find you’ve been within half a mile of a cockfight ever again, I’ll have you castrated and put to work in accounts. You’re a bit old for the operation, but you’ll probably be all right. Understand?”

“Yes, Dad.”

“Sorry, I’m a bit deafer than usual today. Say again?”

“Yes, Dad.”

“Splendid. Now then, what about Bloodvane versus the White Death of the Sclerians in the first round? Bloodvane’s got the form, but they reckon White Death always performs much better on sand.”

Basso won seven hundred nomismata betting on the cockfights, all of which he donated to the war widows’ fund. That winter’s issue of gold coinage bore the usual portrait of the First Citizen on the obverse and the winning cock, Rat-biter, on the reverse, crowned with laurel and with its claw raised, poised to deliver the winning blow.

Four

War, he'd often said, was an admission of failure. It therefore came as something of a surprise when, on the first anniversary of his election as First Citizen, Bassianus Severus declared war on the Kingdom of Auxentia.

In his speech to the House, he set out his reasons. First, in spite of repeated requests, the Auxentines had done little or nothing to curb the activities of the pirates operating out of the coves and inlets around Enyalis. Second, a number of citizens of the Republic, innocent merchants, had been arrested by the Auxentine authorities on spurious or trivial charges, and were being held, in appalling conditions, in the King's jail. Third, the King had closed the vital commercial entrepôt of Phrourion to Vesani commercial traffic, thereby interrupting the well-established trade route to the East. Finally, the King had unlawfully confiscated the property of three of the Republic's major trading companies, expelled their representatives and usurped their business interests. Although he was naturally reluctant to take military action unless absolutely necessary (ironic cheers from the Opposition benches), he felt that in the face of such a catalogue of provocation and abuse, he had no alternative. The Vesani Republic, he believed, had to prove to the world that its love of peace should never be mistaken for weakness or cowardice. Although (he continued) declaration of war was the prerogative of the First Citizen and therefore no vote of approval was necessary, he nevertheless called for a division on the issue, waiving his prerogative rights and undertaking to be bound by the outcome. A vote was taken, and the measure approved, ninety-eight wards to forty-one.

“Because I felt like it,” Basso snapped, turning away. “Look, do I have to have a reason?”

They felt uncomfortable. It wasn’t like Basso to refuse to answer a direct question; not to them. “All right, fine,” Sentio muttered. “Sorry I asked. It’s just, it’s so unexpected. You could at least have told us, before announcing it in the House.”

Basso turned back and looked at him. “Why?”

Sentio stiffened as if he’d been punched in the face. Cinio said, “Because we’re on your side. We’re here to help you.”

“I didn’t need your help,” Basso replied. “Standing up and talking for five minutes is something I can manage on my own, thanks all the same. When I need your help, I’ll ask.”

Cinio stared at him for a moment, then nodded. “Right,” he said. “Well, if that’s everything, I’ve got work to get on with. Thank you so much for your time.”

He walked away. Basso didn’t seem to have noticed. In fact, they might as well not have been there.

“Basso,” Tazio said quietly, “is anything the matter?”

“No.” He didn’t look up. He was signing letters. “Should there be?”

“Fine. In that case, we’ll leave you to it.”

“That’s right,” Basso said to his desktop. “Oh, and see if you can find General Aelius. I suppose I’d better talk to him.”

They found Aelius in his garden, pruning the grapevine that grew against the back wall of the portico. He hadn’t heard.

“Why?” he asked.

They looked at each other. Then Tazio said, “We don’t know.”

Aelius frowned, and carefully closed up the blade of his pruning knife and put it in his pocket. “Don’t give me that,” he said. “You’re the Cabinet.”

“We used to think so,” Sentio replied sadly. “Now we’re not quite sure what we are. Somewhere between a messenger service and the enemy.” Then he frowned, and added, “I’m amazed he didn’t talk to you about it.”

“Me too,” Aelius said. “I’m not a politician, but I’d have thought that if you’re thinking of starting a war, it’d be common sense to ask your Commander-in-Chief if he thinks it’d be a good idea.” He swept a pile of

prunings off the paving slabs with his foot, then said, "Have you asked him?"

"Yes. He didn't want to talk to us."

"Oh." Slowly and carefully, like a surgeon preparing for an operation, Aelius took off his gardening shoes and pulled on his boots. "That's interesting. Did he say when he wanted to see me?"

"Straight away," Tazio said. "Look, you've known him longer than any of us. Any ideas?"

Aelius shook his head. "I scarcely know him at all," he said. "And he'll have his reasons."

Although it was some way from the barracks to the Severus house, and he had a perfectly good chaise and a coachman with nothing else to do, and senior officers of state were discouraged from going about the City on foot, for reasons of security and the dignity of office, Aelius decided to walk. He'd never quite managed to get used to the idea that walking was somehow a shameful thing (like war; an admission of failure), an activity confined to the lower orders who couldn't afford transport. Where he came from—But he'd left home a long time ago, and he sincerely hoped he'd never ever go back. Even so, he walked.

One reason was so that he could look about him. It always surprised him how inept the citizens of the Republic were at reading the mood of their own city, just by looking at it. He never had any trouble, but the politicians and bureaucrats he mixed with these days didn't seem to have a clue; probably, he reasoned, because they never walked anywhere.

First, people were talking to each other—not to strangers, of course; it'd take more than a mere outbreak of hostilities for that to happen—but the pace of human movement in the streets and squares had changed quite significantly. People stopped when they met an acquaintance, instead of just nodding, smiling and walking on. They seemed to be listening to each other rather more than usual; a sign that they were worried, or at least bewildered. Although Aelius didn't pause to eavesdrop, he could tell a lot from the volume and pitch of voices. He'd witnessed the start of quite a few wars during his time in the City, and it was easy to gauge how people felt about them. Louder, deeper voices and laughter suggested a popular war, where the expectation was of quick, easy victories, enemy losses high, home casualties low, and no distressingly steep rise in the rate of taxation. Louder,

higher voices, with scowls and shaken heads, implied an unpopular war—shortages, taxes, interruption of normal business, inconvenience and nuisance. Low voices meant people were afraid the war might come here, like an unwelcome relative inviting himself to stay. This time, the main topic of discussion was why: why had Basso suddenly taken it into his head to pick a fight with a bunch of foreigners who nobody liked much but who'd never done them any significant harm, and who might as well not exist for the effect they had on daily life? A good question, Aelius thought; and one which the group mind of the Republic hadn't yet found an answer to.

Just past the Arch of Lucanus, with Zeno's Arch dead ahead, he stopped. I know nothing at all about the Auxentines, he thought, and in a day or so's time, I'll be setting out to do them as much damage as I possibly can.

He took a slight detour, down Coppergate, through the Linen Market into the Foregate, where the booksellers' stalls were. He went to his favourite stall.

"I want a history of Auxentia," he said.

The stallholder, a huge barrel-chested man with a vast, mossy beard who really should've been a blacksmith instead of a book-dealer, grinned at him. "I bet you do," he said. "Lucky for you I've got one left." He extended an unnaturally long arm and pulled a bronze tube out of the rack. "There you go," he said. "Bryzes of the Studium, in six books, complete and unabridged. With pictures," he added.

Aelius frowned. "How old is it?"

"Oh, really old," the bookseller said. "Three hundred years, maybe even more. None of your rubbish."

"I thought it would be," Aelius sighed. "Haven't you got anything a bit more up to date?"

He'd said the wrong thing. "Sorry, I don't stock *modern* books," said the bookseller, as though he'd just been asked for the *Bedchamber Dialogues*. "One nomisma twenty."

"How much?" Aelius raised his eyebrows.

"They've been flying off the rack," the bookseller said. "Sixth one I've sold today."

"At that price?"

Grin. "War's good for business. Amazing the rubbish you can shift in a war. Soon as I heard the announcement, I went straight home and dug about in the cellar. And there was me thinking my grandsons'd be lumbered with them."

Aelius sighed and produced a coin. "One nomisma."

"One twenty."

"No," Aelius said. "Put it another way. Do you really want to haggle over twenty nummi with the commander of thirty divisions?"

The bookseller's enormous hand closed around the bronze tube. "That'll be another twenty nummi," he said. "Please."

Aelius paid the twenty nummi, stuck the tube in his coat pocket and carried on up the Ropewalk to Whitestairs. Another thing about this place: more people here who could read and write than anywhere else on earth, but all they ever did was copy out books written centuries ago. The specialist medical library in Longacre was the biggest in the world, but every book you looked at started with a catalogue of different types of malignant demon. If you wanted to learn about medicine, you had to find a friendly doctor and ask him.

There were three entrances to the Severus house. There were the great iron gates, ten feet high and topped with spikes, that opened only for weddings, funerals and the visits of extremely important foreigners; the small side gate set into an otherwise blank wall (four ply of interleaved oak and ash board, to withstand battering rams), which led directly into the cloister; and the back gate, reached by an L-shaped alley with its own iron gates, where the tradesmen delivered. Aelius decided he wasn't a tradesman and went in at the side. A porter in a stab-proof quilted habergeon (nice and snug in winter, unbearably hot in summer) opened up for him and handed him over to a footman, plainly dressed in brown, who took him through the cloister, up six flights of the back stairs, and left him in a small, bare room with a chair and a tiny window, like an arrow slit. The last time he'd been here, he'd gone to the main gate and rattled it until a porter came, who'd refused to open up until threatened with being arrested for obstruction. He'd left, however, by the back door, through the kitchens.

It was Basso himself who eventually came to retrieve him. "Sorry," he said, "they must've forgotten to tell me you were here. Follow me."

He hadn't been in Basso's office before. It was square, about the size of the chapter house in the Studium, with an extraordinarily high roof, tapering pyramid-fashion to a point. All four walls were decorated with gilded mosaics. Aelius didn't know much about art, but he'd been to enough functions in temple to recognise the style and the subject matter: the ascent of the Invincible Sun, with full allegorical accomplishment, done in the Mannerist style of three centuries ago. There was something rather like it above the altar in the cathedral, but smaller and not quite so well executed.

Basso must've noticed him staring. "Used to be the family chapel," he said, "but about ninety years ago my great-grandfather fell out with the priests and got excommunicated, and they're still making up their minds whether to let him back into communion. Apparently it's got to go before a committee, and there's a backlog. My father used it as a lumber room. The paintings are by Badonicus."

Aelius nodded. "Very nice," he said. "What can I do for you?"

Basso pointed to a chair, on the far side of the desk. It was a massive thing, its legs made out of the leg bones of some large, exotic animal. The carving on the back was exceptionally fine and rather horrible. He sat down, and Basso perched on a plain, straight-backed chair on the near side of the desk. "Well, you can invade Auxentia, for a start," he said. "I take it you've heard the news."

"Senator Massentius told me just now," he replied. "It came as something of a surprise."

Basso smiled. "You want to know why."

"Yes."

"A number of reasons." Basso leaned back, tilting his chair a little. "There's the reasons I gave the House—aid and comfort to the pirates, the Phrourion blockade, being nasty to our traders. Will that do?"

Aelius shook his head. "Old stuff," he said. "We've put up with it for a long time."

"True." Basso uncovered a large silver-gilt box, which turned out to contain biscuits. Aelius took one and nibbled at it. "The real reason is timber."

"Timber," Aelius repeated.

"Correct." Basso put the lid back on the box. "To be precise, about ten square miles of the tallest, straightest pine anywhere in the world, on the

Opoion promontory. We need it, they won't sell. Or at least, they're trying to make me pay a price that'd mess up the naval budget for years. I'm sick of being held to ransom by a king who milks his own goats."

Aelius raised an eyebrow. "Is that really a good reason for going to war?"

Basso smiled thinly. "People reckon that my answer to that question would be no. If we want to keep our neighbours and enemies on their toes, we have to do what they least expect from time to time. Otherwise, we're predictable, and that's not good for business. My father used to say: every now and then, fly off the handle, overreact, pick a fight for no reason; it makes people a bit more cautious about pulling your tail."

Aelius paused for a moment. He'd only just registered how the room was lit: by four long, narrow vertical windows, made up of dozens of small panes of yellow glass, which turned the light to gold. Then he said: "You're not entirely happy about it."

If Basso was surprised, he covered it up quickly. "Well done," he said. "Presumably Cinio said I've been acting strangely. Well yes, I'm not happy about it at all. War is an admission of failure, and I've failed to uphold the Republic's reputation for brutality and ruthlessness. People are starting to think of us as civilised, which is another way of saying soft. So, sooner or later it's got to be done, and if we do it now, we get something useful out of it."

"The timber."

"Correct. That'll be your main objective. Once we've secured Opoion and garrisoned it, we'll declare peace. All right?"

Aelius dipped his head. "If that's what you want. I don't actually know where Opoion is, but I'm sure we've got a map somewhere. Can we do it?"

"You're the soldier."

"Yes, but can we do it?"

Basso nodded. "Piece of cake," he said. "It's a tongue of land sticking out into the sea. Simultaneous amphibious landings on either side of the narrowest point. When they see our fleet in the Gulf, they'll assume we're headed for Perigouna—that's their second city—so you should have an unopposed landing. In fact, you may get it done without having to fight."

"That would be good," Aelius said gravely. "And then what? Do we start chopping down the trees, or do we just sit around waiting for

something to happen?”

Basso laughed. “I’ll let you know when the time comes,” he said. “Seriously, though, it’s possible. It all depends on who gets the upper hand in the political dogfight they’re going through right now. If it’s the old families allied with the city people, they probably won’t fight. If the small to medium landowners manage to patch up a deal with the southern gentry, they’ll want a proper war. I’m afraid you won’t find anything to help you in your book,” he added. “Much too recent. When that was written, the Eumolpidae were still in power.”

Aelius smiled and pushed the tube deeper into his pocket. “I only bought it for the pictures,” he said.

“Oh, there’s useful stuff in there,” Basso replied. “Good sections on geography and topography, and some of what he says about the legal system is still valid. Most of the rest of it’s copied out of an even older book, and everything else I think he just made up.”

They discussed equipment and supply issues for a while, agreed a provisional timetable and managed to avoid falling out over a budget. Then Aelius left, and Basso leaned forward across the desk, his head in his hands. He was still sitting like that a quarter of an hour later, when his nephew walked in.

“Headache?” Bassano asked.

“You could say that,” Basso replied. “I’ve just started a war, and I’m not quite sure why.”

“Oh.” Bassano walked round the desk to the gilded cedarwood cabinet where Basso kept the wine. “Can I get you one?”

“No, thanks. There’s enough garbage in my head without adding to it chemically.”

Bassano poured himself a drink, and brought the bottle with him. “I heard about the war,” he said. “I was a bit surprised. I thought you always reckoned war’s an admission of—”

“Yes,” Basso said. “And I do. Which makes me ask myself why I did it. If I’d failed at something, I’d have thought I’d have known about it.” He sighed and opened the biscuit box.

Bassano shook his head. “So?” he asked.

“The only explanation I can come up with is that I lost my temper,” Basso replied. “Which I rarely do.” He took a biscuit and put it down on the

desk. “I’ve been playing stupid diplomatic games with those clowns, and they’re a little bit better at it than I am; not good enough to beat me, but I haven’t been able to beat them, and meanwhile they keep on poking me with a stick, to try and needle me into making a mistake. Usually I pride myself on my patience,” he added, “but I guess they caught me on a bad day.”

Bassano nodded. Yesterday had been his mother’s birthday. He’d been there when she sent away Basso’s present unopened, as she always did.

“It’s not a mistake, though,” Basso went on. “We ought to do quite well out of it, in fact. It’s good to be a man of peace, but it’s bad when that’s how people think of you. Did you ever meet Gannarus? No, he died before you came to the City. He used to be our coachman, when I was a boy. Anyway,” Basso went on, lifting his head to look at the painting directly above him, “he told me once that when he was a boy and his parents sent him to school—he came from a good family in his own country, poor devil—the first thing he did on his first day there was find the biggest boy in the playground, pick a fight with him over some nonsense or other, and smack him round the head with a lump of rock. After that, he said, he never had any bother from the other kids, even though he was small for his age and a born coward. Really, I suppose, I should’ve done this earlier.”

“You started off with the war with Scleria,” Bassano reminded him. “Maybe you thought that’d do.”

Basso shook his head. “They attacked us,” he replied. “That’s different. That’s where the school bully picks a fight with you, and you deck him. The virtue of the Gannarus protocol lies in your attack being unprovoked and gratuitous. If you let the bully start it, you’re inviting his competitors to have a go at you later on, to see if they can do better. But people generally steer clear of someone they suspect of being dangerously unbalanced.” He yawned, and picked up the biscuit, while Bassano refilled his glass. “I’ve made a lifetime study of violence,” he said. “I like to tell myself I study it in the same way a doctor studies a disease, but that’s not entirely true. Trying to run a business, or a country, come to that, without using violence is like playing the harpsichord and only using the white keys. No,” he added with a frown, “bad example. I’ll have to think of a better one sometime. Anyway, how are you? How’s your mother?”

Bassano pulled a face. "Hard to live with," he said. "This religious phase she's going through shows no sign of wearing out. It's a pain in the bum, believe me."

"I do," Basso said earnestly. "Really I do. How far has it gone?"

Bassano scowled. "When I left home this morning," he said, "there were six priests in the house, and Mother had them debating the indivisibility of the soul." He drank half his glass of wine. "She wants me to read for the priesthood," he said. "It's getting quite embarrassing."

"Have you thought about it seriously?"

"Uncle Basso, don't say things like that. Not funny."

Basso leaned across the table and topped up his nephew's glass. There was something, subtle but not capable of misinterpretation, about the way he did it that told Bassano there wouldn't be any more. "It's not the worst idea ever," he said. "No, really, think about it. I can get you fast-tracked through seminary, so you won't actually have to read anything, and then, as soon as you're ordained, we'll find a way of getting you a good monastery."

"Uncle Basso..."

"Hear me out," Basso said. "You don't have to run it in person. You don't ever have to go there, even. Half the monasteries in the Republic are held by absentee priors and abbots. What matters is, you get control of the land and the endowment money. A hundred years ago it was a recognised career path, like the House or the army. Even now, the major temples own nearly a fifth of the fixed capital in this town. Meanwhile, you can put in a good freedman as manager and do what the hell you like." He smiled. "And wouldn't your mother be pleased?"

Bassano wriggled, as if trying to slip out of a net. "I'll think about it," he said.

"You mean no." Basso shrugged. "Face it," he said, "sooner or later you're going to have to do something. I only suggested it because it's as close as anything to what I know you really want to do."

"Which is?"

"As little as possible. Which is fine," Basso added quickly. "The less you do, the less chance there is that you'll do something wrong. Really, I think the priesthood would suit you much better than the law. Too much work in the law. Could seriously impinge on your free time."

Bassano pulled that face: tease me if you enjoy it, but please get it over with. “Actually,” he said, “I’ve been thinking. How would it be if I joined the Bank?”

Basso sat very still for a moment or so, and when he spoke his voice was much quieter. “Your mother wouldn’t want that,” he said.

“No, but I think I would. No,” he added quickly, “please listen. A few months back, I started following the markets; just for fun, to see how I got on. I pretended I had a hundred thousand to invest, and I’ve kept a ledger and accounts; you can see them if you like. The fact is, if it’d been real money, I’d have made fifteen thousand profit by now. I really do believe I’ve got the touch. Inherited, of course, from my uncle.”

Basso sighed. “For a start,” he said, “it’s not quite the same when it’s real money. Also, the market’s been rising steadily all this year—too much, as it happens, which means there’s going to be a nasty fall. Have you predicted that? No, I don’t suppose you have. It’s not something you can pick up just by light of nature.”

“You did.”

“No offence, but you’re not me.” Basso looked away, apparently concentrating on a painted angel just above the door. “For which you should be eternally grateful. I don’t doubt you could learn it easily enough,” he went on, “particularly if I taught you; even better, if Antigonus taught you, like he taught me. But your mother wouldn’t stand for it, so that’s that. Sorry.” He kept his eye on the angel, so he wouldn’t see Bassano’s face. “If you like,” he went on, “I’ll give you some money, so you can bet for real. Just don’t let your mother—”

“I don’t want to play at it, Uncle Basso,” Bassano interrupted. “And if you gave me money I’d probably spend it. I want to learn the business. I think it’s what I want to do.”

For some reason, the Invincible Sun chose that moment to drive a shaft of bright light through the thick yellow glass of the long windows. It caught the gilded mosaics just right; exactly how the man who’d designed them must have intended. If Basso had been so inclined, he might have taken it as an omen, or at least some sort of expression of divine interest.

Unfortunately, the Invincible Sun had never acquired the knack of making His meaning clear; like a man with a cleft palate, Basso decided, or a sad old man who shouts in the street. “Bassano,” he said, “I want you to listen

to what I'm going to say. Please don't interrupt, and if you want to be mortally offended, please do it after I've finished talking. All right?"

The pained, long-suffering look; Bassano did it ever so well. If it had been anybody else, Basso would have suspected him of practising in front of a mirror. But Bassano never had to practise anything. "Sure," he said. "Fire away."

"All right," Basso replied. "Feel free to take notes; there may be questions afterwards. Because of me," he went on (and his voice hardened just a little), "you grew up without a father, and with a neurotic, overprotective mother. It eases my conscience a little to try and offer you a little guidance from time to time. Now guidance isn't always the most welcome present an uncle can give. It's better than socks or a nice illuminated hymnal, but it's no match for a pedigree falcon or actual coined money. Never mind. Here we go."

He paused. Bassano was looking at the wine bottle over the rim of his empty glass. Basso moved his head almost imperceptibly from side to side.

"What you are," Basso continued, "is a typical product of your class and background; a better specimen than most, I'll grant you, but even so, pretty much standard issue. Thanks to your excellent education you're perfectly equipped to debate philosophy with a Master or literature with an Arbiter, but you couldn't boil an egg or sew on a button. You're smart, lazy, fussy, a perfectionist—if you can't do something perfectly first time, you can't be bothered with it at all; fortuitously, you've got so much natural talent that you actually can do most of the things that interest you by light of nature, but all that means is you get bored easily, and move on to the next thing. You've got maybe a bit too much charm, but on balance I'd be inclined to say there's no real malice in you—"

"Thank you so much, Uncle."

"You're welcome. It's actually a major compliment. Your cousins the twins are good lads, both of them, and I love them dearly, but they've both got a vicious streak in them that worries me to death. You, on the other hand, are genuinely kind-hearted, when you can be bothered to take notice of anything that calls for kindness. In other words, you're ideally suited to the life you were born to, and I think you'd probably make a very good job of it. I can see no reason why you shouldn't keep yourself harmlessly amused for a good long lifetime, and everybody will like you, and you

won't make many very bad mistakes. You want to watch your drinking, mind. It's getting to be a habit."

"Noted," Bassano said dryly. "Is that it?"

"Not quite. You remind me ever such a lot of my father; not as I knew him, but what people have told me about how he used to be when he was a young man, before he married my mother. Objectively considered, that was a bad decision. My mother was a strong woman, intelligent, rather more so than Dad was. It made him want to do things, make something of his life rather than just let it wash over him. She was why he went into politics, and why he was always trying to do well in business, and both of those ambitions nearly ruined him. But he had a ridiculous amount of good luck, which balanced out his appalling judgement, so he ended up breaking more or less even." Basso paused, reached for the wine bottle and Bassano's glass, poured a small measure and drank it. "He wasn't nearly as intelligent as you are," he went on. "In fact, not to put too fine a point on it, he was an idiot. But he had other qualities that made up for that: he was brave, loyal, never particularly self-indulgent, and he had enough sheer force of personality to punch his way through. That's what he turned out like. That's not how he started out. With me so far?"

Bassano nodded slowly. "You reckon that if I go into business, it'll make me all nasty and twisted."

"That's something of an oversimplification," Basso said quietly, "but you're on the right lines. I think that if you go into business, and you knuckle down and try really hard and apply yourself and harness all your considerable abilities, you might end up something like me. And that," he added softly, "would be a dreadful shame. That's all," he went on, "sermon over. Feel free to slam out of the room, if that's what you want to do."

Bassano shook his head. "That'd be flouncing," he said. "I don't flounce. But seriously, Uncle, I don't see what the problem is. And," he went on quickly, before Basso could say anything, "I really don't want to read for the priesthood."

"All right." Basso spread his hands in a soothing gesture. "We'll forget about that, then. And in return, you'll forget about the Bank. Agreed?"

He knew the look that passed quickly over his nephew's face: an orderly retreat to regroup before counter-attacking. "Fine," Bassano said.

“Whatever you say. And at least that way, Mother won’t have the satisfaction.” He grinned. “That’s worth something, at any rate.”

“You shouldn’t antagonise your mother.”

“Why not?” The grin became a smile. “She loves to quarrel, and I don’t mind, so long as it’s just stupid stuff. Actually, it’s about time we had a good fight. She’s been a bit down lately. Raw emotion cheers her up no end.”

Basso asked him to stay to dinner, but he said he was meeting some friends. “Next week some time,” he added vaguely. Basso nodded.

“Seen much of the twins lately?” he asked.

Bassano raised an eyebrow. “You have a reason for asking?”

“Of course.”

“In that case, yes, I ran into them at the Ring the day before yesterday.”

“What’s new?”

“Really,” Bassano chided him, “why don’t you ask them yourself, instead of having me spy on them? They haven’t got any ghastly secrets, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Would you tell me if they did?”

“Yes,” Bassano replied. “But there’s nothing to tell, except that Festo’s got a crush on the Blues’ new snake-girl. Nothing you need to worry about,” he added quickly, as Basso breathed in sharply. “She’s way too old for him, and practically engaged to the bear-master. And he’s far too savvy to go smashing in the face of the First Citizen’s son.”

Basso smiled. “I knew a soldier once who did just that.”

“Really?” Bassano looked surprised. “You, you mean.”

“That’s how come I’m deaf in this ear.”

“I never knew that. So what did you do to him? This soldier, I mean.”

Basso leaned back a little in his chair. “He’s just about to lead the attack on Auxentia.”

“General Aelius?” It wasn’t often Basso managed to stun his nephew quite so effectively. “You’re kidding me.”

“Ask your mother,” Basso replied. “She was there. Actually no, better if you don’t, unless you really feel the need to verify my assertion. It’s perfectly true, though. And you’re the first person I’ve ever shared that particular fact with, so I’d be obliged if you’d keep it to yourself.”

“Of course.” Bassano waited, then said, “Well?”

So Basso told him.

“Seriously? You beat up a soldier when you were fourteen?”

“He wasn’t expecting it,” Basso said mildly. “I kicked him very hard on the kneecap, which hurts a lot; and while he was groggy with the pain, I laid into him as quickly as I could. I recommend the method to you, if ever you have to fight someone bigger than you. Start off by causing the maximum of pain. It buys you time.”

Bassano shook his head in wonder. “You’d be better off telling Festo that,” he said. “I don’t get into fights, ever.”

“But Festo does?”

Bassano nodded. “But he always wins. And he never starts anything. Fights just seem to blossom and grow around him, like flowers round the feet of the Goddess. I saw a man take a swing at him the other day just for blowing his nose in a flower shop.”

“What was Festo doing in a flower shop?”

“A bouquet,” Bassano said gravely, “for the snake-girl. He sends one round to the dressing room after every performance. There you are, you see. Harmless.”

“Except when he’s starting fights.”

“Causing,” Bassano said, “not starting. There’s a difference.”

It was the custom for the First Citizen to send a suitable gift to the Commander-in-Chief on the eve of his departure at the start of a new campaign. Basso sent three. One was a beautifully illuminated copy of Bryzes of the Stadium’s *History of Auxentia*; the third edition, two hundred years old, in a gold tube embossed with scenes of naval warfare. Another was a dozen bottles of resinated black wine, a vice which Aelius had always thought he’d managed to keep secret. The third was a life membership of the Blues; an extraordinary gift, something that no amount of money could buy. Two life memberships a year were awarded by each team’s general assembly, who were reckoned to be the only incorruptible officials in the Republic; it strained his imagination to think what Basso must’ve done to secure one for him. All in all, it was a pity that he was the only adult male in the City who didn’t follow the horse racing.

(“Presumably he didn’t know that,” commented Major Artabazus, his adjutant, as they watched the City grow faint over the stern rail of the ship.

“Of course he knew,” Aelius replied. “He knows everything.”)

The fleet sailed at the start of the one month in the year when the Garrhine Strait could reliably be navigated in relative safety, and swept into the Gulf before the beacons could be lit. The intelligence reports were proved right: the main Auxentine fleet was in the harbour at Perigouna, where the prefect immediately raised the great chain that blocked the harbour mouth, quite reasonably fearing that the enemy intended to break in and burn the ships at anchor. However, a squadron of six galleys and three auxiliaries, escorting the grain fleet, had earlier been forced into the little port of Obrys by bad weather. When Aelius’ ships were sighted off Garrhae, this squadron put out to sea and launched a frantic, unexpected attack, just as Aelius was about to change course for the Opoion promontory. Having no choice but to fight, Aelius engaged, only to find that the Auxentines had rigged out four grain freighters as fireships. As luck would have it, the wind changed just as the fireships emerged from the centre of the Auxentine line; they were carried straight at Aelius’ troopships, which were too slow and heavy to get out of the way. Ordinary fireships would have been bad enough; but the Auxentines had packed them with barrels of flour, soaked in oil and garnished with tubs of pitch from the Obrys dockyard. Fanned by the brisk, fortuitous breeze, the pitch burned hot enough to ignite and detonate the flour. Three of the troopships, each carrying a thousand men, were blown out of the water; burning debris fell on the decks, sails and rigging of another six, which immediately caught fire and burnt down to the waterline before anybody aboard could organise a proper evacuation. Meanwhile, the six Auxentine galleys, displaying a level of courage and seamanship nobody had expected of them, managed to cut Aelius’ line, sink five brand new Severus-built galleasses, and force their way through and out the other side. They then sailed on to Perigouna, where the chain was briefly lowered to let them into the harbour. For his part, Aelius kept going with what was left of his fleet to the Opoion promontory, where, as anticipated, he met no resistance whatsoever. His final count put his losses at eight thousand soldiers and marines, three hundred and sixty sailors, five galleasses, nine troopships and two seventy-oar galleys (run aground in

their haste to get as far as possible from the fireships). It was the Republic's worst naval defeat in three hundred years.

The eight thousand soldiers weren't really a problem. As Basso remarked at the time, that was what was so good about hiring mercenaries: plenty more where they came from, and dead men don't need to be paid. The three hundred and sixty citizens of the Republic, on the other hand, were a different matter entirely.

"We'll just have to declare victory as convincingly as we can and move on," Sentio said. He hadn't touched his wine, or the plate of cinnamon honey-cakes Basso had sent out for specially. "We can say that in spite of our heavy losses, we successfully achieved our objective in capturing the Opoion promontory, which gives us the leverage necessary to force the Auxentines back to the negotiating table."

Basso smiled. "Very good," he said. "You know, that's what my father would've done. Tazio?"

"What he said," Tazio grunted. "I've been reading the dispatches. Their ships definitely attacked us *after* Aelius changed course towards Opoion. So, we can choose to interpret that as the Auxentines attacking us *because* we started to make for Opoion, in which case the fact that we carried on and seized control of the promontory, in spite of the attack, means we won. We achieved our objective and were left in possession of it when they withdrew. Victory."

"Indeed." Basso rolled up the report and stuck it back in its tube. "But that's not what we're going to say."

Two hours later, in front of an emergency session of the House, Basso made a formal report on the battle of Obrys. He himself made the point that it was the most serious defeat since Vrissa; all the worse, he added, because the Republic had been beaten by numerically inferior forces displaying reckless courage in the defence of their homes and families. Quite apart from the horrific loss of life, it was a shattering blow to the Republic's prestige and practically an invitation to other hostile nations to treat them as a second-class power. Therefore, he went on, the only possible option was to wipe the disgrace off the record by taking Perigouna. To this end, he proposed reinforcing General Aelius with an additional fifteen thousand

infantry and six thousand cavalry, supported by a fleet of twenty galleasses—which, he undertook, would be furnished by the Severus yards at no expense to the state within fourteen days—and all necessary supplies and matériel. He had not, he went on, wanted an escalation of the war. Indeed, it was a guiding principle of his that war is an admission of failure. But in this case, such an admission was unavoidable. The Republic had failed in battle against its enemy. Unless and until that failure was reversed, it could not expect to enjoy the position on the world stage to which its achievements entitled it. In the circumstances, it would be reckless, irresponsible and arrogant of him to allow his personal distaste for war and his reluctance to engage in it to prejudice the real interests of the state. Therefore (although, as he reminded the House, no vote was needed) he commended his proposals to a division and trusted that he would enjoy their support.

“ ‘Out of your tiny mind’ was the actual phrase he used,” Basso said. He drew the tip of his forefinger down the line of the falcon’s neck. It shuddered and wriggled its wings. “Well?” he said. “Worth the money?”

“You know I haven’t got a clue about falcons,” Bassano replied. “It’s just a bird with big claws. How much do they want for it?”

“Five hundred.”

“My God.” Bassano seemed genuinely shocked. “Is that usual?”

“For a bird that’s as good as this one’s supposed to be, it’s actually quite reasonable.” He stooped and lowered his hand below the bow-perch, obliging the falcon to step up onto it. “I’m not sure, though. I’ll need to see it fly first. Come on, let’s find the man.”

They walked out of the darkened shed into thin gold sunlight. The falconer was nowhere to be seen. “You know, Uncle,” Bassano said, “I’d be inclined to agree with your man Tazio. It seems such an odd thing to do.”

Basso laughed. “Good,” he said. “What I’m hoping is that right now, all over the City, people are scratching their heads and asking each other, What’s he playing at? After the first month or so, a First Citizen is like a middle-aged wife. She’s got to make herself interesting, or as soon as an opportunity presents itself, she’ll be replaced.”

“Very good,” Bassano said. “But I still agree with Tazio. You must’ve been out of your tiny mind.”

Basso quickened his pace. "The House certainly thought so," he replied. "Which is why they voted for me. Give him enough rope, they thought. It's how I'd have voted. If we win, they were loyally supporting the army. If we lose, it was all my fault. A vote against me was a vote for national humiliation." He shrugged. "I like to be nice to the Opposition," he said. "If I kept beating them all the time, they'd just try harder to get rid of me."

"You're an infuriating man, Uncle. Why?"

Basso stopped. "I'll give you a hint," he said. "My father always used to say, the man who wins in the end is the man who can get the most out of a defeat. Ah, there's the falconer."

So, while they were being shown the falcon in flight, Bassano thought about it; and when the falcon pitched in a tree and refused to come to the lure, and they were waiting patiently for something to happen, he said:

"You *want* to take Perigouna."

Basso smiled. "I'm still not going to let you join the Bank," he said. "But yes, essentially. Now then. Why?"

The falconer muttered something about going back for some more bait. They watched him stomp away, head bowed. "Because," Bassano said, "you've decided—don't ask me to account for your decision—that the Republic needs an empire. Well?"

Basso grinned. "I wouldn't put it in those terms," he said, "but something like that. Territorial expansion. It's something we've never gone in for, unlike most of our neighbours, rivals and enemies. We've always been merchants, traders, businessmen. We don't invade other countries or take their land, because we're not farmers or colonists. It's a nice idea, but a bit old-fashioned for the modern world. Of course, if I got up in the House and said, We need to expand overseas, let's annex somewhere, they'd have my head on a stick. But if we acquire a foothold on the mainland purely by chance, as a side effect of an unwanted but necessary war, that's quite different." He looked up, but the falcon hadn't moved. "Of course I'm gambling that we'll win, but I think it's a safe bet. I trust Aelius; he'll be utterly determined to win and win big. If we win, everybody'll decide the war was a really good thing after all and the defeat won't matter. We'll have our first colony, and I'll have the timber on Opoion. Really, you can see, I didn't have any choice in the matter. It's a curious thing," he added, "but

such successes as I've enjoyed in my life have always come as a result of my having no choice."

Half an hour later, the falcon flew away and didn't come back.

"He must be mad," Aelius said.

Nobody seemed to be in a hurry to disagree with him. Just outside the tent, someone was having trouble with a cart bogged down in the mud. One voice was shouting what sounded like orders, another was shouting back, presumably reasons why those orders could not be obeyed. The sound of the rain on the canvas roof was like the drumming of impatient fingers.

"But he's the boss," Aelius said, and the half-dozen men grouped around the rickety folding table from which the war was being run relaxed a little, as men do when the worst possible option is confirmed. "So here we go. First things first. Phernes, it looks like we'll be having company in a week or so." He squinted down at the letter on the table. "Twenty-one thousand men and six thousand horses. I suppose you'd better see if you can find something for them to eat."

Phernes, in charge of supply, closed his eyes then opened them again. "That could be awkward," he said. "If we're still cut off by sea, that means trying to bring stuff down the mountain, and that won't be—"

"No," Aelius said. "It won't. But do your best. Metalces, you'd better find them some space. Twenty-one thousand men, one latrine to a company, you'd better start digging. Phormio, we'll need more sheds for storage; just as well there's all that timber." He grinned. "Don't you hate it when people invite themselves to stay?"

Shortly afterwards, there were only three of them: Aelius, his adjutant Artabasdu and Gelimer, commanding the nominally autonomous Be'man Perdut auxiliary cavalry. Aelius unrolled the map, and they sat for some time in silence, looking at it.

Finally, Gelimer said: "I still can't see it."

"Nor me," Aelius said, "but it's got to be there somewhere. Come on, think. That's what they pay us for."

They shuffled their stools closer to the table. "Let's go through it from the beginning," Aelius said. "We're agreed, we can't risk trying to land from the ships, so these"—he ran his finger over the seaward arms of the

projecting triangle of the Perigouna Peninsula—“are out of the question. Which means we’ve got to come in over the mountains, across the plain, and over, under or through the land walls.”

“Which is impossible,” Artabasdos said helpfully.

“Which hasn’t ever been done before,” Aelius said. “Correct.” Suddenly he stood up, walked across the tent and looked out through the flap. “They still haven’t got that stupid cart shifted,” he said. “They’ve been struggling with it all the time we’ve been in here.”

“It’s the rain,” Artabasdos said. “Only to be expected. What it’s going to be like on the through roads when there’s another twenty thousand—”

“And the horses,” Gelimer put in. “Sometimes I think horses’ hoofs were designed specially to turn earth into glue. What we need is some proper hard standing.”

Aelius nodded. “It’s an extraordinary thing,” he said. “No matter how bad things seem to be, they can always be made worse by two days of steady rain.”

“There’s a drought in Middle Paeonia,” Artabasdos said. “Hard to imagine there could be such a thing as a drought anywhere in the world.”

Gelimer grunted. “It’ll be because some idiot’s been messing around with the flow in the rivers,” he said. “Nine times out of ten, where there’s a drought, it’s because of that. Some rich bastard diverts the river so it’ll irrigate his soft-fruit plantation, and the next thing you know, a hundred square miles of good growing country’s turned into a desert. It happened all the time back home. One of the reasons I left.”

Aelius turned his head and looked at him. “That’s a thought,” he said. “Gelimer, pass me the book.”

“What book?”

“That brass tube there on my bed.”

“Oh, that.” Gelimer stood up, moaned at a touch of cramp, and fetched the tube. “This one?”

“How many books do you think I own?” Aelius unscrewed the stopper and poked his fingers inside until the end of the roll appeared. “Present from our beloved First Citizen,” he said. “I only brought it with me in case we ran out of cabbage leaves.”

Artabasdos leaned over his shoulder. “I like the ones with pictures in,” he said. “That must be worth a bit of money.”

“I think it may turn out to be far more valuable than Basso ever imagined,” Aelius replied, running his finger slowly down the roll. Hold on, it’ll be here somewhere. Ah, got it.”

Gelimer came across and stood behind him so he could see. “That’s a bridge,” he said.

“Close,” Aelius replied. “Actually, it’s a really bad drawing. Look.”

Not a bridge; an aqueduct. Built nine hundred years earlier, at the height of the Eastern Empire, it carried nearly two-thirds of Perigouna’s drinking water down from the mountains. At the time, doubts had been expressed about the wisdom of concentrating such an essential supply in one conduit; an enemy, it was argued, only need sabotage it, and the city would be helpless. To counter that possibility, the Imperial architects built it so massively that it would take an estimated fifty thousand men one year to put it out of action.

Aelius’ invasion of Perigouna was a perfect example of how to cross apparently impassable terrain quickly and without significant loss. He went ahead with the Be’man Perdut cavalry to secure the road, allowing the main body of the army to proceed at its own pace. In little over six weeks, they’d built nine bridges, dug a hole through the side of a mountain and laid nearly twenty miles of portable road across the marshes. As anticipated, the Auxentines retired behind the walls of Perigouna and let them get on with it. The city, they knew, had never fallen to a direct assault, and since they controlled the sea, a siege would be much more painful for those outside the walls than the garrison within them. True, the enemy army was very large—nearly forty thousand, according to some reports—but the very size of it was in Perigouna’s favour. Unable to bring in supplies by sea, they only had such food as they could carry with them over the mountains, supplemented by the relatively trivial quantities they could find in the surrounding countryside. But winter was drawing on; all that season’s harvest had been brought inside the city walls, where Aelius’ foraging parties couldn’t touch it. True, they’d been very efficient in rounding up every herd of cattle in the province; but unless they could feed all that livestock (which of course they couldn’t) they’d have to slaughter them all, have one enormous barbecue,

and go back to gnawing the soles of their boots. Blessed is the nation, the Patriarch of Perigouna said in one of his sermons in the basilica, whose enemies are idiots.

It was only after the first three days of the plague that the Perigounan doctors realised it wasn't a plague at all. It was a particularly unpleasant variety of flux, brought on by drinking contaminated water. It caused death within forty-eight hours in most cases. Scouts sent out by the governor traced the source of the contamination to the high bowl of pasture in the foothills of the mountains, where the mountain streams that fed the aqueduct consolidated into the Nessus River, and where General Aelius had penned up all the cattle he'd rounded up. They were stalled, the scouts said, in long sheds on both banks of the Nessus, which was in spate as a result of the unusually heavy rainfall, and the slurry drains fed directly into the river, so that, as one scout put it, not one precious drop was wasted.

Two days later, Perigouna surrendered, on the grounds that there simply wasn't enough fuel in the city to boil enough water to supply so many people. It was the one commodity they hadn't thought to stockpile, and the ships couldn't bring it in fast enough.

"You were lucky," Antigonus said.

Basso nodded. "Yes," he said, "I was. I think I've inherited some of my father's luck. I hope so. When he relied on it, it never let him down."

He was worried about Antigonus. He seemed older. It was practically impossible to tell; he'd looked much the same for the last twenty years. But it was almost as though he was just starting to slow down, like a music box. Pressure of work would account for that, of course.

"There's a saying where I come from," Antigonus said. "Luck's like a pig. If you push it, it'll go back on you."

Basso had heard it before, of course. The first time, he'd smiled. "I think that maybe you have a different kind of luck in your country," he said, "like different varieties of butterfly. Here, I've always got the impression that luck gets stronger with use, like a muscle. Dad always thought so."

Antigonus shook his head. "You're nothing like him," he said. "Which reminds me. Your nephew came to see me yesterday."

Basso hadn't known that. He pretended to be interested in a letter on top of a pile on the desk. "I hope he wasn't a nuisance."

"He wanted me to teach him banking. Like I taught you, he said."

"Really." Basso kept his voice level. "What did you tell him?"

"That I'd talk to you about it. He seemed rather put out when I said that."

"As well he might. I don't want him anywhere near the Bank."

Antigonus raised an eyebrow. "He's not that bad. My impression is, he's quite bright."

"Very bright. But he's not joining the Bank."

A slight shrug. "As you wish. I'll write him a letter."

"Leave it to me." Basso stood up and walked round the desk, like a horse in a small paddock. "Talking of which," he said, "I'd like to ask a favour. If I send Festo and Pio to sit in with you for a few days, would that be a terrible nuisance?"

"Of course not," Antigonus replied. "If they get under my feet, I'll throw them out."

"Excellent," Basso said, but there was a slight edge to his voice that few people other than Antigonus would've noticed. "If you're sure it won't be a problem for you."

(Ah, the old man thought. I wondered when he'd notice.)

"Not at all," Antigonus said firmly. "Now, I suppose I'd better tell you my news. I saw that new doctor yesterday; the smart young fellow from Chorylene that everybody's going to now."

Basso didn't move. "Oh yes?"

"He says I've got six months."

Basso closed his eyes. "I'm sorry."

Antigonus didn't seem to have heard that. "I intend to prove him wrong," he went on. "The absolute minimum I need to get things ready for my departure is nine, and a year would be much better, so I intend to last a year. By that time, I should have everything in a fit state to hand over to my successor. We'll discuss that in a moment," he added, before Basso could open his mouth. "First, we need to restructure the Bank, along the lines we've discussed before. Also, I want to streamline the auxiliary businesses—the shipyards, the mines, the various joint ventures. On the political front. I think we should shift our alliances a little bit more towards the centre—

especially now, since you've decided we need an empire and colonies, and heaven knows what. Finally, there's the household business, which I confess I've been neglecting. I may have to leave some of that, being realistic. Oh, and I want to go home to die, back to my village in Dramisene. I've allowed two weeks for the journey, since I'll have to take it slowly. I'm sorry if this is difficult for you," he added, almost gently, "but I thought we'd better discuss it sooner rather than later."

Basso turned back and looked at him. His eyes were dry; angry, almost. "Your successor," he said.

"Ah yes." Antigonus nodded. "I was thinking of Tragazes."

Basso's eyes opened wide. "You're joking."

"Not about business, ever," Antigonus said reproachfully. "Obviously, it's your decision. But I've given it a great deal of thought, and I believe he's far and away the best man for the job."

"Tragazes," Basso repeated, as though it was some strange, mildly obscene word in a foreign language. "Are you sure? I was within an ace of sacking him a month ago."

"Your decision," Antigonus repeated. "My recommendation, but it's up to you. Now, if that's everything you need me for today, I'd better be getting on." He lifted his head and smiled unexpectedly; it was like finding a silver coin in the street. "Do you know how old I am, Basso?"

Basso opened his mouth, then paused. "No," he said. "I've got no idea."

"Eighty-seven," Antigonus replied. "Naturally, I'm a little bit disappointed. Ariobarzanes was eighty-nine and still running the Empire more or less single-handed when he was murdered, and Lydus actually led the Auxentine army on a successful campaign against the Aram Chantat when he was ninety-two and nearly blind. But I'm not minded to complain. I've lived nearly as long as I wanted to, and I've made myself useful. It's certainly been better than herding goats."

That evening, Basso cancelled his dinner party, had the doors of the house closed early, and took a lamp up to the top floor of the east wing. He hadn't been there for over twenty years. The room he chose to sit in was completely empty, ever since he'd sent its contents to his sister. The oil in the lamp lasted for two hours. When it burned out, he sat in the dark until morning.

Five

On his triumphant return, General Aelius was awarded the Civic Crown (for saving the lives of his fellow citizens; it was pointed out afterwards that since Aelius wasn't a citizen, he wasn't eligible, but nothing was actually done about it), the title of Count of the Silentiaries (nobody had known for at least two hundred years what a silentary actually was) and the surname Perigouniacus, to be his and his legitimate heirs' for ever (Aelius was over fifty and resolutely unmarried). As was the custom, he entered the City alone and on foot by the Land Gate, where he was met by the full House in procession and escorted to the City Temple, where prayers of thanksgiving were sung. He was then led through the streets with a noose around his neck, thereby signifying in the traditional manner his voluntary submission to the House and the people of the Republic, to the Black Palace, where a thousand white doves were released to celebrate the restoration of peace, and a special issue of silver pennies were thrown to the crowd from the First Citizen's balcony. After that, as Basso put it, the rest of the day was his own.

"I know," Basso replied, when Aelius pointed out that the pennies were silver-plated rather than solid. "We've spent a fortune on this war, and I'm damned if I'm going to make people hate me by raising taxes before we can convert the takings from Perigouna into clinking money. Right now, the only thing between us and national bankruptcy is a massive loan from the Bank. Sorry, but your victory pennies weren't a priority."

Aelius nodded meekly. "Like I care," he said. "The whole thing was a shambles anyway, so it's appropriate, really."

“Plated coins for a plated victory?” Basso grinned. “I like that. Makes me wish I was in opposition; I’d get a big laugh with it in the House. It’ll be all right soon,” he went on, pouring Aelius a drink. “We stand to make money on the deal.”

“We?”

Basso nodded. “Splendidly vague word. We, as in the state, will be in profit as soon as the cash deposits from Perigouna have been reminted. We, as in the Bank, are getting interest on the government loan at one per cent over base. We, as in the people and Republic, have just acquired our first colony, though they, as in the people and Republic, haven’t realised it yet. Best deal I ever made, as my father would’ve said.”

Aelius drank his wine in two gulps. It was, he recognised, a fine vintage, meant to be sipped, but he didn’t like the taste of the fancy stuff. “You’re a clever man,” he said. “You’ve always had the knack of turning shit to gold.”

Basso smiled at him. “Talking of which.”

Aelius pulled a face. “I know,” he said. “General Cowshit. Even my senior staff have started calling me that. Still, at least I earned it. I’m not sure I can even spell Perigouniacus.”

“They’re talking about a coat of arms for you,” Basso replied, stone-faced. “I can’t wait to see what they come up with.”

“Ah well.” Aelius looked for somewhere to put down his glass. All the furniture in the Black Palace had been made while his people were still using bronze tools. “Let me tell you something,” he said. “When they opened the gates and we entered Perigouna, there were these stacks at the end of each street, like woodpiles. They were covered with ships’ sails, so all you could see were the ends: layers of naked feet, twelve in a row, twelve deep. Strangest thing I ever saw. I don’t suppose I’ll forget it in a hurry.” He put down the glass slowly and deliberately in the middle of a round walnut table, whose finish shone like a mirror. “General Cowshit,” he said. “You know, I’ve been called worse.”

Basso took off his left glove, picked up the glass and put the glove under it. “I’m personally responsible for the fixtures and fittings,” he said. “Privilege of office.”

Lunch with various party grandees; then he went back to the Severus house for his afternoon appointment. He took the back stairs to his office.

The duty clerk must have heard his feet on the stairs; he knocked and came in without waiting to be called.

“Tragazes is here to see you,” the clerk said. “I put him in the ante-room.”

Basso nodded. “He can wait,” he said. “I’ll just finish these letters.”

He gave it ten minutes, by his beautiful new Auxentine clock (a present from the House, taken from the spoils of the governor’s mansion), then got up and opened the door.

“Sorry,” he said, “they didn’t tell me you were here. Come on through.”

Basso knew that the frame of the connecting door was exactly six feet two inches high, because his great-grandfather had had the proportions copied exactly from the sunset chapel at the Studium. Tragazes had to duck to get through. There’s so much of him, Bassano had said once, and all to no purpose.

“Can I get you a drink?” Basso asked.

“Sorry?”

He repeated the offer, raising his voice and speaking slowly. “Oh, no, thank you,” Tragazes replied. “It’s a bit early for me.”

Basso formed a quick smile, which cost him effort. There was something inherently wrong about Tragazes. The mind of an elderly spinster in the body of a dragon-slayer, someone had said once; and to be sure, it was mildly disturbing to hear that tiny, thin voice coming out of that enormous head, projected by that massive chest—as if one of the great trebuchets that guarded the harbour mouth had tried to shoot a pebble, and only managed to send it five yards. No doubt the operation had had something to do with that; but Tragazes was far from being the caricature eunuch. He hadn’t run to fat, as so many big men did. Once, when a grain cart had got stuck in the ruts in the Horsefair, he’d rushed to lend a hand (always so helpful, so eager to please), and he’d lifted the back end clean off the ground while the carters packed sacking under the wheels. That was Tragazes; and the look on his face when he realised his gown had got muddled up and his shoes were ruined.

“Very sensible,” Basso said, pouring himself a larger glass than he actually wanted. “Sit down.”

The chair creaked, and Basso caught himself expecting it to collapse. It would’ve been dramatically right, because that sort of thing happened to

Tragazes, and when it didn't, you felt that something had gone wrong. "So," he said, "how's it going?"

"Sorry?"

And that was another thing. Basso knew he ought to sympathise with a fellow sufferer; but he'd spent his life figuring out how not to be deaf. Instinctively he turned his good ear towards the speaker, watched his lips, came closer. Tragazes just made you say it again.

"How are things at the Bank?"

"Oh, quite quiet." Tragazes frowned. "We're a bit concerned about the Tremissis brothers. They're two days late."

Basso shook his head. "They're good for the money," he said.

"Oh, yes, of course. And they're only late because their ship from Rugeo got held back by the weather. But it bothers me that they're so overcommitted. If anything had happened to that one ship, they'd have had to default."

"On one month's payment," Basso said. "Which in their case I'd be happy to roll over."

Tragazes looked at him; mild, faintly disapproving, a wise subject bowing to the whims of a foolish king. "Of course," he said. "The collateral is very good. But we're a bit concerned, even so. We're keeping an eye on them."

Basso took a deep breath. "Personally," he said, "I'm more concerned about the Strength Through Simplicity. Is it true they want to borrow another ninety thousand?"

Tragazes nodded. "As a matter of fact, I authorised the loan just this morning. That brings the total up to three hundred and seventy thousand."

Just the question he'd been about to ask. "That's rather a lot."

Another nod. "We have debentures for two hundred thousand, and personal guarantees for the balance. Also, we insisted on full accounts for the last two years and a detailed projection of future commitments. It's a very sound business. We think they're poised to break into a very interesting new market."

Exactly what he'd have said to Antigonus, though he'd have used better words. "Keep an eye on them, too," he said.

"Of course."

Why did talking to this man make him feel like he was carrying bricks uphill? “So,” he said, “what do you make of this business in Scleria?”

Tragazes, it turned out, made more or less the same of it as he did, though he contrived to make it sound dull and somehow obvious. He had that knack. And all the while, he sat perfectly still, as though only the parts of him required for answering questions were alive. Basso thought about that. It was almost as though Tragazes was aware that his reserves of energy belonged to his employer, and he wasn’t prepared to expend a single movement if it wasn’t entirely justified. When he’d completed his presentation (it was hard to think of it that way), he paused, blinked, and said, “Is there anything else?”

“I don’t know,” Basso replied. “You tell me.”

Another pause, and the pale blue eyes seemed to glaze over, until Basso was sure he was about to fall asleep. Then he shifted ever so slightly in his chair (which creaked) and said, “We were wondering whether this would be a good time to take over the Land & Sea Credit.”

Basso frowned, as though what he’d heard didn’t make sense. “Why would I want to do a thing like that?” he said.

The explanation followed, smart as a military parade, and Basso realised that the arguments were good, the opportunity was real, and he hadn’t thought of it for himself. Tragazes, on the other hand, had clearly gone into it in great depth. “Just a moment,” he interrupted (and Tragazes shut up instantly, faster than any mechanism). “That’s not bad,” he said. “Why didn’t you mention it earlier?”

“We still don’t have the end-of-quarter results,” Tragazes replied. “We would want to see a four per cent decline in domestic business, coupled with a slight rise in bad debt provision. That would tilt the balance of leverage just enough in our favour.”

Well, of course. He felt like a peasant for having to ask. “Before we act, yes,” he said. “But you might have mentioned it.”

“Sorry,” Tragazes said. “We didn’t want to bother you with it till we were quite sure.”

Of course they didn’t. “It’s a good idea,” Basso said. “Yes, we’ll do that, once we’ve got those figures. Thank you, you’ve done a good job.”

But praise just seemed to skid off, like a file on hardened steel. “We’ve also been looking at the situation in Boezen,” Tragazes said. “We feel that

some sort of intervention may become necessary to stabilise the hyperpyron against the nomisma, which would of course involve us in buying quite heavily in the short term. However...

A curious thing, Basso thought, and something he wouldn't have believed possible. Tragazes could make something like the Boezen currency crisis boring. He was, of course, quite right. If the Bank stuffed a huge wedge of Republican nomismata into Boezen over the course of the next month, it would stop the run on the hyperpyron; the Boezen Emperor would then have no choice but to up the gold content, maybe going back to the pre-war standard of twenty parts fine, which would result in Boezen effectively pricing itself out of the bulk timber market. The Bank could then sell hyperpyra at a profit. No way in hell was that boring, but Tragazes made it sound like it was. In which case—

"I approve," he said. "You carry on and do that, assuming it all pans out. Meanwhile, there's something else I'd like you to do for me."

"Of course."

"My nephew," Basso said. "He's very keen to join the Bank. Now, he's a bright lad with a good head on his shoulders, but he's new to business and he's never done a day's work in his life. I'd like you to have him sit in with you for a while, just to get the feel of things; maybe you could explain the basics to him, so he gets a proper understanding of what the work of the Bank is really all about. Would that be all right?"

The pale blue eyes blinked. "We'd be delighted," Tragazes said. "Only too pleased."

"That's settled, then," Basso said. "I'll send him over to you. No special treatment, mind. I want him to make himself useful."

"Of course."

Indeed. Of course, of course. "Thank you," Basso said, "that's all."

Tragazes stood up, practically filling the room, bowed his head—it wasn't his fault that a gesture evidently intended to convey sincere respect put Basso in mind of a bull about to charge—and left the room, closing the door firmly behind him. When he'd gone, Basso looked down at his left hand (the damaged one) and found that he'd been gripping the arm of his chair so hard he'd left nail-marks in the wood.

Bassano was late. He'd been held up, he explained, by the crowds in the streets, going home from the victory parade.

"Really?" Basso frowned. "I'd have thought your end of town would've been relatively clear."

"I didn't come from home," Bassano said.

Basso had ordered dinner in the small cloister, looking out over the lavender garden. It had turned out chillier than he'd expected, so he'd had them light the boilers to heat up the underfloor conduits. It took time, though, for the hot water to feed through, so he'd sent in for a brazier as well, and the breeze was blowing the smoke back towards the house. "Oh," Basso said. "Anyway, you're here now. You'll like this. Sea bass, in mustard sauce."

Bassano liked his food. "Thanks, Uncle," he said. "As it happens, I'm starving. I missed lunch."

They moved their chairs to avoid the smoke, which meant they had to look at the wall instead of the lavender beds. "Did you see Aelius' parade?"

"I caught a bit of it," Bassano said. "Where they were leading him through the Pig Market on that rope. He didn't seem awfully happy."

Basso laughed. "Don't suppose he was. It's hard to cut a dashing figure when you look like you're being led away to the gallows. Still, I asked him if he wanted the full traditional entry. Serves him right if he couldn't be bothered to look it up first." He poured the wine, but Bassano said, "If it's all right with you, I'll just have water."

"Really?"

Nod. "I'm going to get used to it by stages."

"Explain."

Bassano took off his gloves and laid them on the table. "I did as you suggested," he said. "I've enrolled at the Studium. Hence, no booze for a month. I don't actually have to lay off it until term starts, but—"

"You did what?"

Bassano grinned. "I'm going to be a priest," he said. "Like you said I should."

"Oh." Basso put down his glass without drinking. "But I've just arranged for you to start at the Bank."

Bassano pulled a face. "Now he tells me. Why the change of heart?"

"It's what you wanted."

“And since when was that a good reason for anything?” It was a quotation, of course, from the collected aphorisms of First Citizen Bassianus Severus. “Mind you, that wasn’t the only reason. Mother’s been on at me. Basically, it was either join up or move out, and I simply can’t face packing up all my stuff and finding somewhere. Also, I have genuinely been thinking about what you said. The priesthood’s a good career, so long as you don’t get bogged down in the religious side of things.”

Basso had intended to shout at him, but it came out as a sort of ferocious laugh. “For crying out loud,” he said. “Oh well. Tragazes’ll be disappointed.”

“The gentle giant? What’s he got to do with it?”

“You were going to go and sit in with him for a month.”

Bassano grinned. “Is that right? Well, in that case.” He shook his head. “The idea being, I suppose, that after a month with Tragazes I’d run away and join the circus, or enrol in pearl-diving school or something.”

“More or less,” Basso admitted. “So that’s all right. But seriously. You’re not just doing it to please your mother?”

“No,” Bassano said, running a fingertip round the edge of his empty glass. “But it is a factor, yes. I guess you haven’t heard Mother’s news.”

Basso didn’t like the sound of that. “I would, of course, be the last person to hear.”

“Indeed.” Bassano looked away. “She’s getting married.”

It would have to be that moment when they brought in the food: the very finest sea bass, caught that morning in the bay, in a sauce cooked by an Isacian that Basso had hired specifically because he knew how to handle sea fish properly. Neither of them even looked at it.

“Say that again,” Basso said.

“You heard.”

“All right. Who?”

Bassano waited a full three seconds before answering. “Olybrias. You know, he runs the—”

“I know who he is,” Basso snapped, so savagely that Bassano winced. He wasn’t too keen on loud noises. “But that’s ridiculous,” Basso said.

“And anyway, she can’t. He’s not even a citizen.”

“Actually, he is,” Bassano said quietly. “Or he will be in three weeks’ time, when the Donatives come out. Apparently he made a large

contribution to Optimate funds, so the Labieni have adopted him.”

“That’s...” Basso could feel his chest tightening. He lowered his voice. “For God’s sake,” he said. “General Aelius isn’t a citizen, and he’s the Commander-in-Chief. What sort of sense does that make?”

Bassano had the grace not to point out the obvious flaw in that line of argument. “You could stop it,” he said. “If you wanted to.”

“Interfere with the Donatives?” Basso laughed. “Sure I could, if I don’t mind committing political suicide.” He shook his head. “You know, it’s a crying shame we don’t let women into politics. Think what a leader of the Opposition your mother would have made. It’s the simplicity of it that really impresses me; that, and the sheer intensity of the malevolence.”

Bassano looked at him. “So what are you going to do?”

“Me?” Basso shrugged. “Nothing. At least, not till I hear the rest of it.”

“You think there’s more.”

“Definitely. And I can see several lines of attack she could be following, but until she tells me, I won’t know which it really is. I’ll say this for her, she makes life interesting.”

He didn’t have long to wait. A letter arrived the next morning: if his schedule allowed, could he possibly spare her half an hour, say at noon? If so, she’d call at the House; no need to send a carriage.

“Well?” he said.

He hadn’t seen her for ten years. The shape of her face was basically the same, but she’d put on weight; she looked swollen, as if she’d been stung by a wasp, and her hands and wrists were soft and pudgy. There were streaks of grey in her hair; the fact that she’d left them grey was a statement in itself. She was wearing plain black, with no jewellery.

“Thank you so much for seeing me at such short notice,” she said. “May I sit down?”

“Do what you like,” he replied.

“Thank you.” She perched on the edge of a chair, her hands folded in her lap. She looked as though she’d come to apply for a job as a nanny. “I suppose my son’s told you my good news.”

“For pity’s sake,” Basso snapped. “Will you stop that?”

She blinked at him; reminded him of Tragazes, which really wasn't good. "Stop what?"

"Being polite. It doesn't suit you."

"You might try it some time."

She's better at this than me, he thought, so I'd better change the rules of engagement. "Quite right," he said. "So, yes, Bassano did tell me."

"And you're happy for me?"

He gave in and sat down. "Oh, delighted," he said. "I'm sure you must be as happy as a songbird. You're going to marry my chief business rival, who also happens to be a high-profile supporter of the Opposition. Short of stabbing me in the neck, you could hardly have done a better job."

She smiled at him. "So you're not going to make difficulties."

"Sorry, no." He smiled back. "If you mean, am I going to veto his grant of citizenship in the Donatives, I'm afraid I can't oblige you there. When I decide to end my political career, I'll do it my own way, not yours."

"I'm so glad. We were hoping to get married as soon as the Donative formalities are out of the way. If we'd had to fight you in the courts..."

"You'd lose."

"Yes, but think of all the harm it would do you. So it's just as well you're going to be sensible, isn't it?"

He breathed out, until he'd drained all the air out of his lungs, then slowly breathed in again. "Why do you want Bassano to be a priest?"

"Because I don't want you luring him into the Bank," she replied. "But I'll come to that later. I just want your promise about the citizenship. To make sure we understand each other."

"I promise," Basso said sourly (and he thought: she's making me sound like a little boy). "All right," he said. "Can we stop messing about now, please? What's the deal?"

She looked at him as if he'd just propositioned her in the street. "You don't change, do you? You always have to attack, whatever happens."

"I'm sorry you think so," he replied. "But no, I don't. I'd far rather negotiate. So, please, tell me what you have in mind."

She nodded, rather gracefully, as if accepting his surrender after a long and unnecessary siege. "First," she said, "you leave my son alone. I don't want him coming here, seeing you, spending time with you. I don't want him writing to you, or you writing to him. Second, under no circumstances

is he to join the Bank. Also, I don't want you giving him shares in the Bank or anything like that. He's going to be a priest. Do you understand?"

Basso nodded. "And if I agree, you won't marry Olybrias."

"That's right. Oh, I haven't quite finished yet. There are two other conditions."

Basso sighed. "You're pushing it," he said, "but go on."

"Actually, I'm being rather moderate. I would actually have quite liked to marry again."

"Olybrias?"

She shrugged. "The foundation of any good marriage is a shared passion. Olybrias hates you passionately. I suppose that makes him and me ideally suited. Also, he's a devout Pavian."

"I didn't know that," Basso said, "but it figures. Go on, then. Two more conditions."

"Yes." She unfolded her hands and put her left forefinger on her right thumb, as though counting. "Under his father's marriage settlement, Bassano comes into his money in six months. You're the sole surviving trustee. I want you to resign the trusteeship in favour of the Patriarch of the Studium. That way, he won't get his money until he's ordained, which won't be for three years."

Basso looked up. "That's—" He stopped himself. "Your idea?"

"Mostly. Second," she went on, "I want you to marry again. Since it may take you a while to find someone who'll have you, I'll give you three months—until the twins' birthday. In fact, I can't think of a nicer birthday present for them."

Basso's eyes were wide open. "Are you out of your mind?"

"Certainly not." From her sleeve, she'd taken a neat little rosary: one big gold bead for the Invincible Sun, a big silver bead for the lady Moon, and seven small silver blobs for the stars. She was picking at the Moon with her thumbnail. "The idea is that in due course, you'll give the twins a little half-brother, who'll inherit the Bank. I don't want that woman's children to get anything of my father's. Is that clear?"

That woman. Fair enough. "You know I can't agree to that," he said. "For pity's sake, who in their right mind is going to marry me?"

She frowned, just a little. "The First Citizen," she said. "The richest man in the City. I don't think you'll have any trouble. Just so long as she's

fertile and capable of producing young, I really don't care. Of course, I'd prefer someone about half your age, so she'd have lovers. It'd be interesting to see what happens."

Basso looked at her. "I can't do that," he said.

"Pity." She stood up. "That condition isn't negotiable. Take it or leave it."

"The rest, yes." Basso jumped up and stood between her and the door. "That, no."

She took a step back. "Get out of the way, please. I want to go home now. You'll get your invitation to the wedding in a day or so. Do please try and make the time to come."

He didn't move. "Please," he said, "try and be reasonable."

"Reasonable." She spat the word at him, quietly but with an almost unbearable intensity. "I think we passed that stage quite some time ago. In fact, I've been quite unreasonably generous. Now please move away from the door so I can get through. You're just making a fool of yourself."

A solid lump was blocking his throat. If he couldn't get rid of it, he'd choke. Apparently, the only way was to stand aside. She passed him, taking care not to let even the fringe of her sleeve touch him. "Thank you," she said. "I'm sorry we couldn't sort something out, but there it is."

Her fingers were on the door handle. "All right," he said.

She froze, then laughed: a long, silvery laugh, a middle-aged echo of a girl laughing. "Honestly, Basso," she said, "you're pathetic. People think you're so hard and strong, but really you're a pushover. Are you really that scared of Olybrias?"

The lump was gone but his throat and chest were burning, as though he'd been running hard. "No," he said. "No, I couldn't give a shit."

"Really."

"Really." He turned his head away, so as to be able to speak. "But if you hate me that much, I'll do it. Just so you can have your revenge."

She sniffed. "Oh dear," she said. "Melodrama." She opened the door. "And please don't fool yourself," she said. "I've barely started."

Some time after she'd gone, he left the House and headed for home.

In the back lobby, his guards were waiting for him. For some reason they hadn't heard him coming; he found them sitting on the mosaic floor, under the statue of Victory. (The giant gilded bronze used to tower over the front steps on a six-foot marble pedestal, but thirty years ago, one of Her wings broke off, and She was moved out back. A specialist had been sent for, from Auge, to braze the wing back on. He hadn't turned up yet.) They were playing cards and passing a bottle round.

Basso watched them for a moment, then tapped the ring he wore on his left hand against the pillar he was standing next to. They all looked up immediately.

"Go home," he said.

They would probably have argued, pointing out that it wasn't up to him; they'd been assigned to accompany him every time he went out in the public streets, and they took their orders from the City prefect, not the civilian administration. But they must have seen from the look on his face that he wasn't in the mood for that sort of thing. They scrabbled up the cards, the bottle and their helmets and left quickly.

Just Victory and me, Basso thought. He looked at Her, but Her eyes gazed straight out over his head; and besides, the sockets were empty. The bust-off wing was in storage somewhere. He smiled, and bent down to pick up a ten-nummi bit that the card-players had left behind. Of course, he'd never had any trouble with money. It came to him, the way some people attract dogs. He flipped it over and saw his face: three-quarters, looking back over his shoulder, a very fine likeness of someone he'd have liked to have been, once. But it was just soft copper (to help pay for the street improvement programme, he'd halved the amount of tin in the alloy), and so his hair and beard were almost worn away, and there was just a trace left of one eye. That's me, he thought; but even so, I'm worth two bottles of Eburan resinated any day of the week.

He put his hat on, left the House and walked slowly down the Golden Acre to the knot of little streets at the back of the Artillery. There he drank himself; and when he'd finished himself off he drank his father, and two-thirds of Favonius Maeso, who was a sort of second cousin on his mother's side, until his stomach felt bad and he was sick of the taste of resin. At that point, he decided to go home. He stood up; the manoeuvre lacked precision,

and he barged into a big, fat man in a leather apron who was propping up the bar.

“Sorry,” he said.

The fat man looked at him. “That’s all right,” he said. “No harm done.” Then he frowned. “You know what?” the fat man said. “You look a bit like him.”

“Do I?”

“Yes, you do. A lot like him.”

“Which him would that be?”

“You know.” The fat man frowned. “Him. The big boss man. The chief bloody artichoke. You know. Basso the fucking Magnificent.”

“Oh, *him*,” Basso said. “You reckon?”

The fat man looked at him. “Spit and image,” he said. “Cut your hair, tidy yourself up a bit. Here, you could earn good money. You know, being Him. In pantomimes and stuff.”

Basso raised both eyebrows. “You really think so?”

“Course.” The fat man did something with the index and middle fingers of his left hand, and immediately the barman brought two drinks. Not the resinated stuff. When Basso lifted his glass, he reflected that he was holding wine to the value of the back of his own head, and maybe even an ear as well. “There’s that bloke, you know. Does Glabrio in the Horse Fair. Sits there on a big sort of throne, and you get five eggs at him for a shilling.”

Basso nodded slowly. “Good point,” he said. “But people want to throw eggs at Glabrio. You reckon they’d pay a turner to chuck eggs at Basso?”

The fat man laughed, so that every square inch of him shook. “A turner? They’d pay a fucking gold bit. *I’d* pay a fucking gold bit, and I’m a poor man. You could clean up, mate. You could coin it.”

Basso nodded. “But they’d be throwing eggs at me.”

“So bloody what? It all wipes off, and then there you are, fistful of money for doing fuck all.”

The barman, he noticed, was staring at him; then their eyes met, and the barman scuttled away, very fast. A perceptive man, and wise with it. “I’m from out of town,” Basso said. “What did you say they’re calling him now? Basso the...”

“The Magnificent.” The fat man laughed again, and this time the bar shook too. “Basso the Magnificent. What a laugh, huh? There’s times I just

don't understand people, you know?"

"Nor me," Basso said. "That's quite a handle, though. What did he ever do?"

"Bloody good question." The fat man raised his glass and gobbled down a nose's worth in one convulsive swallow. "*Bloody* good question. Yes, there must be a good few people round here who'd like to know the answer to that one."

"Yes," Basso said pleasantly. "But why Magnificent? Why not the Great or the Wise or...?"

The fat man laughed again; it was a pity he was drinking at the time, because the spray went everywhere. "That's a fucking charm, that is," he said, wiping his beard on his sleeve. Then he lowered his voice. "You know he killed his wife."

"Everybody knows that."

"And his brother-in-law. Found them, you know, at it, and killed them both. Chopped his balls off with a bloody great axe and ripped her open like a letter. And a man like that gets to be First bloody Citizen. You wouldn't believe it if you read it in a book."

"Quite," Basso said. "So why the Magnificent? Seems odd to me."

"You and me both," the fat man said, "you and me both. Still, no skin off your nose, right? That's what you should be doing, I'm telling you; get an old cart and a few buckets of eggs, and a bit of old curtain, you can paint Basso the Magnificent on it in big letters. Six months, you'd be a rich man. Got to be better than what you're doing now." He stopped and frowned. "What're you doing now?"

"I work in a bank."

"Well, there you go, then. Got to be better. Trust me. Six months, you won't know yourself."

"You know," Basso said, "I'm going to have to think about that very seriously." He paused. "You really think I look like him?"

"Just like him." The fat man reached over and patted the back of his hand. "Could be twins, mate. Could be twins."

Basso laughed. "Maybe we are twins," he said. "Maybe we got separated at birth, like in the play."

The fat man frowned. "Don't talk soft, pal," he said. "Stuff like that doesn't happen. Besides, you don't want to go saying stuff like that where

people might hear you.” He lowered his voice again, and spoke so softly they’d have had trouble hearing him in the next street. “He’s got spies everywhere, you know. Every-bloody-where.”

“I’ll bear that in mind,” Basso said meekly. “There’s another thing, though. Do you think it’s time he got married again?”

The fat man gave him a look of deep scorn. “You what? Come on, get real, listen to what you’re saying. Who the fuck in their right mind would marry a man like that?”

Basso turned to the bar to order another bottle, then remembered that the barman had left; so he put a silver siliqua down on the bar-top, reached over and pulled a bottle out of the rack. “I’m going to buy you a drink,” he said. “To say thank you.”

“No need for that,” the fat man said gruffly.

“I think there’s every need,” Basso said cheerfully. “The man who may have launched me on the road to fame and fortune, of course I’m going to buy you a drink. And what’s more, you’re going to tell me your name and where you live, so that when I’m rich and famous I can send you ten per cent.”

The fat man looked at him. “You serious?”

“Absolutely serious. In fact,” Basso said, “I’m going to make you a solemn promise. Everything I make out of having eggs chucked in my face, you get ten per cent. No nonsense, no messing about. One tenth. Take it or leave it.”

“Five,” the fat man said. He was slurring his words. “Five per cent. Ten’s too much.”

Then the fat man told him his name and address, which Basso recorded by carving it into the sole of his shoe with his gold-handled penknife. “You want to be careful, carrying something like that around,” the fat man warned him. “You get caught with that, it’s an offensive weapon.” He had to have three tries at saying “offensive”. “You could wind up in jail, you know?”

“I’m allowed,” Basso said. “Clerk, see? I’ve got to be in a position to sharpen my pen at any time.”

For some reason, they both found that unbearably funny, and the fat man laughed so much, he suddenly felt something shift ominously inside him, and lurched out back to get rid of it in a seemly fashion. Basso took

the opportunity to escape through the front door into the street, where the fresh air made his head spin. But not for long. Half a dozen long, deep breaths solved the problem, and he walked home without any further incident. He took the precaution of drinking two pints of water before going to bed, overslept, and woke up with nothing worse than indigestion. In fact, he felt absurdly cheerful. True, he was going to have to think of something if he wanted to keep up his friendship (he liked to see it in those terms) with his nephew, while the remarriage business, hers or his own, was going to have to wait until his head was fully clear again. But his sister wasn't going to marry his worst enemy after all, and as for that other stuff—

He remembered there was something he had to do. He retrieved yesterday's shoe from under the bed, and rang the bell for a footman, who went and fetched a clerk.

"I want you to send two cases of the reserve Eburian to this address." He'd written it out on a piece of paper. "Covering note on parchment, with the City seal." He thought for a moment, then dictated: " 'Bassianus Severus thanks you for your advice, which he will most certainly act on should the occasion arise; in which case, he will consider himself bound by his contract.' "

The clerk bowed crisply and left, and Basso finished dressing, combed his hair and beard carefully and went down to his breakfast meeting.

"Where on earth did you get to last night?" Sentio demanded. "You were supposed to be coming to us, remember. And then the soldiers said you'd sent them away."

Basso shook his head. "Don't ask," he said. Then he shrugged. "Actually, I made a good deal. Maybe the best I ever made, I don't know yet. Something to fall back on if things don't work out."

Cinio raised his eyebrows. "Considering a change of direction?"

"It's an option," Basso said. "Basically, I've discovered I could make a good living pretending to be myself, though when you think about it, that's not much different from what I'm doing now. While I think of it," he added quickly, "there's something I want to ask you. What do people call me?"

There was an awkward silence. Then Sentio said, "That's an odd question."

"I'm serious," Basso said. "Have they got a name for me? You know, like a nickname, or a—well, an adjective. Like Caelius the Great, or

Macrinus the Wise.”

Cinio and Sentio looked at each other. “No, nothing like that,” Sentio said.

“Oh.” Basso frowned. “Anything? Anything at all?”

Cinio picked up a bread roll and drove his thumb into it. “*That bastard* is probably the one I’ve encountered most,” he said, “with *that clown* coming in a poor second.” He cut off a knob of butter and pressed it into the hole he’d made. “There are others, mostly suggesting unnatural relations with various farm animals. Why do you ask?”

“No reason,” Basso said.

When the Donatives list was published, two names in particular caused widespread comment. Nobody was particularly surprised to discover that Olybrias was now a citizen, although there was quite a lot of speculation about what was going to happen next. The unexpected name was General Aelius Perigouniacus, the first high-ranking foreign mercenary officer to be thus honoured in over two hundred years. It was a gamble, people said; barbarians who made a career in the Republican military had always been excluded from citizenship to discourage them from taking any part in politics, for obvious reasons. But if there was to be an exception to that rule, others were happy to argue, Aelius had as much claim to the honour as anybody. He’d never been known to make any sort of political noises, he’d won two good wars, and by all accounts he was a decent enough sort of a person, for a foreigner. So long as nobody saw it as a precedent, there really wasn’t any harm in it; and that business with the aqueduct, and the cowshit...

“He’s got a genius for giving really valuable presents that you don’t actually want,” Aelius said, looking through the window at the parade ground. A thousand new recruits, recently shipped in from Perigouna, were being marched across the main yard to the long shed where they’d have their heads shaved and their feet inspected. He’d been through that shed himself once.

“It’s a great honour, sir,” said a young lieutenant whose name never quite stuck in his memory. “The first time in over two centuries—”

“Yes, I know.” He hadn’t meant to snap. “And now I can marry a citizen, which I have no intention of doing, and I can own land, which I have no intention of doing, and I can vote in elections, which I definitely have no intention of doing. And besides,” he added, “it’s wrong. Soldiers shouldn’t be citizens. It’s a really sensible convention.” He turned away from the window. “Right,” he said. “What am I supposed to be doing today?”

The lieutenant recited a list of names and times, which Aelius couldn’t really be bothered to listen to. Soldiers shouldn’t be citizens. Soldiers shouldn’t really be anything except pieces on a board, to be put back in the box when not in use. It was just as well that they had a use for him most of the time. It hadn’t bothered him much over the years; he’d been too busy making something of himself, as his mother had urged him to do. Youngest commissioned officer, youngest captain, youngest colonel, second-youngest member of the general staff; he’d spent most of his life in offices, trying to figure out the quickest way of moving up the corridor. The trouble with that as a way of life is that sooner or later there’s nowhere else to move up to; at which point, there’s no alternative but to stop and see where you’ve ended up. Youngest ever Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces of the Republic; and now a citizen. He was fit and healthy, it could be thirty years before he died. What the hell was he going to find to fill in the time?

They brought him papers to sign, and then it was time for his first appointment.

Basso sent for his sons. They came in looking nervous, as if they were trying to figure out which of their misdemeanours had been detected.

“I’ve been thinking,” he said, not looking at them. “And really, there’s not much point either of you staying at the University. You’re not exactly intellectuals, either of you.”

Pio mumbled something, but Basso had turned his deaf side towards him. He fixed his eyes on a detail of drapery in the mosaic. “I think you’d be better occupied learning the family business,” he said. “That’s what I was doing at your age. My father didn’t believe in universities, and I’m not sure I do, either.”

“Cousin Bassano—” Pio started to say.

“Bassano’s not like you,” Basso said quickly. “Nature never intended him to work. Besides, work would cut into his free time. You two, on the other hand, need an occupation, otherwise you’ll just fade away. And anyway, someone’s got to succeed me, and you’re the only eligible candidates. So I’ve arranged for you to sit in with Tragazes for a month.”

To their credit, neither of them whimpered; but Festo said, “Just a second, Dad. Why can’t we have Antigonus? He’s the best, you’ve always said so.”

“He’s an old man and very busy,” Basso replied. “Maybe later on, if things work out. Meanwhile, Tragazes can show you the basics perfectly well. He’s a first-rate administrator, and he’s got an almost infinite capacity for patience, which he’s going to need with you two under his feet all day.” He turned to face them, rather unwillingly. “Now listen,” he said. “He may not be the easiest man in the world to get on with, but that really doesn’t matter. Part of your training is learning how to cooperate with difficult and charmless people. I don’t just want you to behave yourselves. I want you to impress him. That’s what I’m sending you there to do. I want to see if you can get a job done, even if it’s no fun. Do you understand?”

Two less-than-happy faces looked back at him. “Yes, Dad,” Pio said. “We’re to make a good impression on Tragazes, and learn the business.”

Basso nodded. “You think you can do that?”

“We’ll do our best,” Festo said.

“Of course you will,” he replied, and something prompted him to add, “and if you make a good job of it, I’ll let you go to Badava for the summer. Well? Is that a good deal?”

They were grinning at him, and he thought: they assume I’d planned that all along, the reward, the incentive. It’s how a good father would’ve structured it; first the bluster and the stern eye, then the special treat, whipped out of the sack at the end. But Badava was just an afterthought, because I was feeling guilty. “But only,” he heard himself say, “if Tragazes gives you a good report; and I mean good, not just all right. I want you to impress him so much, he’d offer you jobs if you’d just come in as stowaways on a grain ship.”

They left the room cheerful, excited, grateful, with something to look forward to (and the Invincible Sun only knew what sort of mayhem they’d get up to let loose in Badava in the long summer evenings), and Basso

thought: I have the knack of doing things well, even when my intention was to do them badly. So what would that make me? Basso the Fortunate?

That evening, there was a letter from Bassano. It arrived in a small wooden box of figs, which made him grin. He hadn't actually hollowed out a fig to hide it in, but it was the next-best thing.

My first day at the Studium. Very strange people. The dogma of the indivisibility of the Double Essence of Being in the morning; land management in the afternoon. Lunch not at all bad. Sharing a room with a very pale man from Vinessus who keeps wanting to talk about girls: what are they like, have I known many, have I ever you know, and if so how often and what exactly happens? Rather wearing. If I murder him, can I have a prerogative pardon? Otherwise quite relaxed, and a good library; they've got a pre-rescension Avitius, would you believe, with the five anathematised chapters. I bet even you never knew that. Hope the tiresome people aren't getting you down. If you felt like sending me twenty nomismata it'd come in very handy; we're not supposed to have money, and I do miss it dreadfully. Not necessarily to spend. I just like looking at the faces on the coins.

Mother told me what you agreed. I understand.

Cordially, Bassano

Six

The first anyone knew of it was a ship, found drifting just outside the harbour mouth. It must have been blown down from the Cape during the night; the watchmen on the Great Light saw it at dawn, and as the day wore on, they wondered why it was just sitting there, when the weather was so fine. Reasonably enough, they suspected it might be a pirate, hanging about waiting for a victim it could tail into less well-regulated waters. When the harbour prefect made his rounds in mid-afternoon the Light captain reported it, and the prefect decided to send a patrol sloop to take a closer look.

The sloop captain, a Verrhoean with twenty years' service, sailed cautiously to just inside hailing range. The ship, he observed, looked like an ordinary Scleriot merchantman: a fat pot of a ship, triple-masted, with high castles, not exactly a pirate's vessel of choice. He tried hailing, but there was no reply, and no sign of activity of any sort. He'd seen something rather similar thirty years earlier, when he was working for his uncle. He sent a boat, with instructions to board if nobody answered their hails.

The boat came back an hour later. Everybody on board was dead, they said. Most of them were lying in their bunks; a few must've kept going until they dropped where they stood, and one man had fallen from the rigging. Any marks, the captain asked: swellings, blisters? Yes, the boatswain said, in a voice that suggested he knew exactly what he'd seen.

The sloop captain knew what to do. He went on board the merchantman personally to supervise the breaking open of the tar barrels and the setting of the fires. Then, once the merchantman was burning well, he set course

for the Cape. There was an island just off the southern point that was kept empty, for use as a quarantine base. Before putting in, he sent the boat to within shouting range of the nearest village on the mainland, and raised the alarm, giving orders for a message to be sent to the City immediately. The village choirmaster (closest thing to a mayor) borrowed a horse and set off for town, where he went straight to the harbour prefect.

The prefect knew exactly what to do. First, he gave orders for the harbour chain to be raised, to stop any ships entering or leaving. Then he sent word to the City prefect, the Guard commander, the gatewardens and the First Citizen's office in that order, and put down the barriers to seal off the harbour from the upper town. The gatewardens closed all the six main City gates and put sentries on the five sally-ports. The City prefect issued emergency notices: all markets, fairs, shops, inns and places of entertainment to close immediately; no unauthorised gatherings of more than five people; a curfew; compulsory notification of plague symptoms to ward and guild officers. The Guard commander posted troops to enforce the emergency regulations, keep order and prevent looting. The First Citizen gave out commissions and warrants to the designated activity officers, conferring the usual additional powers on them for the duration of the emergency, sent compulsory service notices to all registered medical practitioners, suspended the House and called an immediate cabinet meeting.

They were intelligently planned procedures, quickly and efficiently carried out, by men who knew what they were doing. They'd never worked in the past, and this time was no exception.

The room was full of smoke, so thick that Basso couldn't make out the mosaics on the wall ten feet away from where he was sitting. He had a handkerchief pressed over his nose and mouth, but his eyes were watering. It had been proved a century ago that braziers burning aromatic herbs did nothing at all to prevent the spread of plague but everybody still did it anyway. There wasn't anything else anybody could do.

"We know for a fact that it's spread by rats," said the tall, bald doctor, his voice muffled by his scarf, making him sound like he had a bad cold. "That's not a guess, it's science. But this time, it can't be rats. The customs

men who went on the plague ship to burn it took all the usual precautions, and anyway, they didn't see a single rat anywhere."

"How do you know that?" Sentio queried. "By the time our people got to the Cape, they were all dead."

"The captain wrote a log," the doctor replied. "All the relevant details, he was a good observer. They can't have caught it from rats on the merchant ship. It's not possible. And even if one of them had got it, the rest of them—"

"So it can't have come from that ship," Cinio interrupted. "There must've been another ship, with people on it who had the plague at a less advanced stage."

Basso shook his head. "The ship we found adrift was from Leucis," he said. "No other ships in from there in the last month. Besides, you've seen how quick this thing develops. It's hours, not days."

"Then it can't be rats," the doctor said. "In which case, it's an entirely new strain, and everything we know about dealing with the plague is most likely useless."

Basso scratched his head. "Wonderful," he said. "We don't know how it spreads, we sure as hell don't know how to cure it, and it takes hold so fast there wouldn't be time anyway. So what do we do?"

The other doctor, the one who looked like a cat, said: "We let it run its course. No choice in the matter."

"We let it run its course," Cinio repeated. "For crying out loud, gentlemen. We've got to be able to think of something better than that."

Basso turned and looked at him. "Such as?"

"I don't know," Cinio said helplessly. "But my mother and both my sisters died in the last lot, and all anybody said was, there's nothing we can do, just let it run its course. And that's not good enough."

"You haven't got anything to suggest, in other words." Basso turned to the doctors. "How about you?" he said. "Anything at all, doesn't matter how drastic. I'll burn down half the City, if you think it'd help."

"They did that in Coele Opuntia, sixty years ago," the bald doctor said.

"Did it work?"

"We don't know. The fire spread all over the city, and most of the people in the lower town were trapped behind the quarantine barriers and

couldn't get out. It hadn't spread to the upper town, so really there's no way of telling. Personally, I wouldn't recommend it."

"Fine," Basso said. "What else is there? I seem to remember something about diverting a river."

"Dapoeia, forty-six years ago," the cat-faced doctor said. "They dammed up the Asper and flooded the slum district, with the people still in it. Same problem as with Coele Opuntia. Nobody left alive to see if it did any good."

"Besides," the bald doctor said, "we're not dealing with the same disease. In both those cases it was the regular strain, spread by rats. Burn or drown the rats, you get rid of the plague, though of course they didn't know that then. But in this case, since we don't know how it spreads, we'd just be guessing. Suppose it's water-borne, and you flood the whole of downtown. All you'd achieve would be to spread it all through the suburbs."

Basso nodded. "Nothing to be gained from the big, broad gesture, then," he said. "All right. You've left us in no doubt about what we don't know. What do we know?"

The bald doctor frowned. "All we can say for certain is that it's a mass of contradictions," he said. "It's been going on for eight days. In the first forty-eight hours, it spread across a quarter of the City; infection rate close to ninety per cent; mortality, as far as we can tell, something like one in three. After forty-eight hours, it stopped dead in its tracks; no new cases in the next twelve hours. Then there was another spurt, right across the west side; same infection rate, same mortality. Then another pause; then we started getting a few scattered outbreaks on the north side, with much lower infection rates but rather higher mortality. Then practically all the southern wards catch it, but the death rate drops to one in six." He paused to catch his breath, then went on: "In seven out of ten cases, it's all over in twelve hours; they die, or they get better. In three out of ten cases, rising to fifty per cent on the south side, it drags on for eighteen hours, though the mortality ratio stays pretty much the same. That's the worst thing about it, from our point of view. There's no pattern. Which means," he added, "that there is a pattern, but we haven't seen it yet. I just hope some of us live long enough to figure it out."

Basso had been taking notes. "What we need," he said, "is a ship's captain, preferably off a merchantman. Or a fisherman would do just as

well, I guess. Cinio, get out there and find me one, quick as you like.”

Cinio knew better than to argue. He doubled his scarf round his face, got up and left without a word. Basso was frowning at the notes he’d made. “This is no good,” he said. “What we need is a map. Doctor—sorry, I keep forgetting your name. I want you and your colleague here to get a map of the City and mark on it where the outbreaks have been. Sentio, round up some clerks to help them. And when you’ve done that, find Aelius, if he’s still alive, and bring him here.”

“Is that a good idea? What if—?”

“Sorry,” Basso said, “I thought I was the one who’s deaf, but obviously I was wrong and it’s you. Come on, all of you. This is important.”

When they’d gone, he stoked up the fire with laurel, sandalwood and the dried leaves in the bag from his mother’s private store, until he could hardly see at all for the smoke.

Cinio got lucky. The first clerk he asked had a brother-in-law who’d just come home after three months as first mate on a charcoal freighter; he was at the clerk’s apartment right now, just a few hundred yards down the street, in one of the big grace-and-favour blocks reserved for the civil service.

The clerk’s brother-in-law, a short, square man by the name of Mavorsus, wasn’t too keen on leaving the house, but the platoon of Palace guards Cinio had brought along just in case eventually managed to persuade him. He arrived in Basso’s office in the Severus house about twenty minutes after the clerks had handed Basso the map he’d asked for.

Yes, Mavorsus said, of course he knew the winds in the bay. He’d been a sailor all his working life, ever since he used to help his dad on an oyster boat. Including the times of day? The times when the wind changed direction. Well, naturally. You had to know that stuff if you were a fisherman.

Basso showed him the map and explained his theory. It’s possible, Mavorsus said. Possible? Well, it fits. You’d get a good blow coming in from the sea around about then, for sure; we used to ride it home from the oyster beds; and we’d take the turn of the tide out again, when the wind’d be blowing south-west, out to sea. Then we’d be stuck out there until the

late evening north-easterly, which (Marvorsus had to admit) is what you've got written in here.

"It's airborne," Basso said. "It moves when the wind changes. And the incubation period is short. If we know where the wind will be blowing and when, we can move people out of harm's way."

The doctors looked mildly stunned. Sentio looked terrified. Aelius, who'd arrived shortly after they brought Mavorsus in, opened his eyes wide. "I'm convinced," he said. "Mind you, I'm no expert."

"Yes you are," Basso said. "You were at the siege of Lyssa, weren't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"You're an expert. More to the point, you've got the men and the organisation to carry out mass evacuations very quickly indeed. Stop arguing, general, who the hell else is there? The fire brigade?"

"Fine," Aelius said, with a shrug. "Right, I need to know when, and where to."

They crowded round the desk, and between them, somehow or other, they drew a new map, heavily annotated with times and directions; big arrows drawn in Basso's imperial purple ink (for signing statutes and decrees) and clusters of numbers in his nearly illegible handwriting, and underneath, other numbers (the designations of army units) in Aelius' tiny, neat, slanting hand. Then Basso looked at his clock and said, "That'll have to do. You'd better get started or you'll miss your chance." Aelius grabbed the map, nodded, and left. After he'd gone, there was dead silence for some time.

"Well," Basso said, "I sincerely hope we've got that right. Otherwise..." He shrugged. "If anybody's got an alternative theory that fits all the facts, this would probably be a good time."

Sentio, who'd been looking very unhappy, said, "You do realise we're risking the lives of everybody in this city on the word of an oysterman."

Basso looked at Mavorsus. "Well?"

"As far as I know, that's about right," he said. "Don't you all go blaming me if it turns out wrong."

"And there you have it," Basso said, throwing his head back and gripping the arms of his chair. "If everybody dies, don't blame us. Hell of an epitaph for a quarter of a million people."

“Who’d have died anyway,” Cinio said quietly, “if we’d just sat here and done nothing.”

“Stick some more of the leaves from that bag on the fire, someone.” Basso grinned. “My mother may have gone a bit strange in her old age, but she knows her home remedies. She bought that stuff from a Verrhoean who swore blind it wards off the plague. Wouldn’t give her the recipe, unfortunately, or else we’d all be laughing.”

The cat-faced doctor pulled a face, then got up and went to the brazier. “They haven’t had the plague in Verrhoe for seventy years,” he said.

“There you are, then,” Basso said. He twisted his neck restlessly, as though the plague was an itch he couldn’t quite reach to scratch. “This has got to be the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever done,” he said. “Sentio, get this man here a large sum of money and send him home. We’ve taken advantage of his sense of civic duty for long enough.”

Sentio stood up. “When you say large...”

Basso laughed. “As much as he can carry. Fill a fucking sack. If we’re right, he’s just saved the Republic. If he’s wrong, in a couple of days it won’t matter a damn. You, what’s-your-name: stay at your brother-in-law’s till you hear from me, and try not to die, we may need you again.”

That left him with Cinio and the two doctors. “Is there anything else we can help you with?” the bald doctor asked.

Basso shook his head. “You two stay here, though,” he said. “Who knows, someone might get sick. Cinio, remind me, what’s the legal position about people who die without making a will?”

Basso stayed in his office for eight days. He slept on the floor, and when he wasn’t working he sat and stared at the mosaics. One of his earliest memories had been sneaking into this room, which was out of bounds by order of his father, and climbing up the mountain of stored and dust-sheeted furniture to get a closer look at the pretty pictures on the sloping ceiling. In particular he remembered one angel with a sad face; her eyes were big and wide open, and a single stylised tear hung from her lower eyelid. She didn’t seem to be there any more.

They brought him reports, every hour on the hour. The evacuations had gone as smoothly as could be expected. Plague had broken out in two of the

evacuation camps, but both the infection rate and the mortality were only a fraction of what they'd become used to. People who'd had the plague and recovered were immune; he conscripted them into burial and security details. Looting was a problem. Aelius' soldiers wouldn't go near areas known to have been infected when the wind was in that direction, and who could blame them for that? But gangs of recovered plague-sufferers were taking the opportunity to help themselves to whatever they could carry. By the fifth day, Aelius had enough men who'd caught the plague and lived to form a specialist squad, who hunted the looters through the deserted streets. For a while, the looters managed to get their plunder past the checkpoints by hiding it on the floor of the handcarts used for clearing the dead and piling bodies on top, until Aelius got wise to that. There were outbreaks of dysentery and other illnesses brought on by overcrowding and exposure in the evacuation camps. With no ships coming in, food was already a problem, and could only get worse. The death toll rose. Accurate figures were hard to come by, needless to say, but the best guesses put it at an average of eleven hundred a day. Firewood, for burning bodies, ran out on the sixth day, and Basso chaired a grim meeting to consider alternatives; burying them would take up manpower urgently needed for other purposes, dumping them at sea would mean lifting the blockade and risking having ships make a run for it. The latter option prevailed; nearly all the sailors who'd been trapped in the harbour district when the plague had first broken out were dead by now, so the risk of unauthorised egress was minimal.

On the ninth day, the estimated total went over ten thousand.

"You know," Basso said, when they broke the news to him, "I simply can't imagine that. Ten thousand people dead. That's enough to fill the Blues' end of the Track, isn't it?"

About that, they said.

Later he regretted thinking about it in those terms. He could see it clearly in his mind's eye: the Track, on a race day, and one end of the auditorium filled with dead people. Well, he told himself, more people than that died in Perigouna, which was entirely my fault, and this isn't. But that didn't work at all, so he sat up all night checking the stores inventories against the supply requisitions; a useful exercise that revealed five clear cases of theft of food. He wrote an order for the thefts to be thoroughly investigated, and the perpetrators hanged, as an example.

On the tenth day, he called a meeting of the full emergency cabinet. The picture, they told him, was inconclusive. Deaths in the evacuation camps were considerably lower than in the infected areas of the City, which had been sealed off. Incidence of new cases, however, had peaked on the seventh day and was now holding more or less steady. The airborne theory, it had to be said, was starting to look a bit ragged; if the theory was correct, there should either be a lot fewer or a lot more cases, depending on the distance the infection could carry. A steady plateau in the statistics suggested that it was being spread by something else, and the evacuations had therefore made no material difference, one way or another.

On the fifteenth day, when the figure topped eighteen thousand, the cat-faced doctor presented an alternative hypothesis. It wasn't airborne at all, he said; it was in the water, just like the contamination at Perigouna. As evidence, he produced maps of the underground cisterns, with the routes of the sewers overlaid in red. The fluctuations Basso had noticed weren't in fact anything to do with the wind, though it had been a reasonable enough mistake; they were in fact linked to the tides. If (the doctor argued) an unusually high level of silt had drifted into the outlets where the City sewers flowed out into the bay, it could alter the course of the currents. Foul water could, under a complex concatenation of circumstances, be flowing out into the sea and immediately be drawn in again by the backdraft; in which case, it would end up in the overflows, which travelled along three-hundred-year-old lead pipes which had been neglected for a long time. It was entirely possible that those pipes were leaking; in which case, contamination could easily enter the cisterns, from which the City drew all its clean water. The fluctuations they'd been observing were consistent with this theory: accelerated incidence of infection when the tide turned (which coincided with some, though not all, of the predictable changes in wind direction), and irregularities in both incidence and mortality that could be explained quite simply by the extent to which the contaminated water was diluted—in other words, whether the cistern tanks in question were empty or full at the time. The evacuation camps, he pointed out, drew water from the cisterns, but by the time it reached the outskirts and the suburbs, a lot of the flow would have been diverted to other places, while additional clean water would have entered the system from the outer rainwater traps and underground springs; accordingly, the contamination in the water that

reached the camps was consistently more diluted than it would be further inside the City, hence fewer cases and a lower fatality ratio.

When he'd finished, Basso said, "But what about the blisters, and the swellings on the face and wrists, and the lumps under the arms? That's plague, not poisoned water, surely."

"It's plague, but it travels in water," the doctor said. "Obviously a new variety we haven't come across before."

So they tried again. Aelius rounded up as many immune citizens as his press gangs could catch, and they dug channels to draw off water from the river upstream of the City into the cisterns. It took five days, during which both incidence and mortality declined steadily and substantially. By the time the sluices were opened and the grand dilution programme was finally under way, the death rate was down to twenty or so a day. It went up again almost immediately, but the cause was an outbreak of typhoid, caused by the unfiltered river water, rather than plague.

Among the very last recorded cases of the plague were six novices at the Studium, all of whom died, and two members of the First Citizen's own household. Because of the quarantine regulations, it was impossible to find out the names of the dead novices until the movement restrictions were lifted. For the same reason, Basso had to wait until Aelius (in charge of coordinating the emergency while he was himself quarantined) told him he was allowed to write to his sister to tell her that their mother had died. He didn't bother telling her that he'd had the plague as well. It was self-evident that he'd recovered, and she wouldn't have been interested in anything solely to do with him.

One of the first letters he received once the blockade was lifted came in a jar of dates. It read:

Thought you'd like to know I'm not dead; assume you're not either, but would appreciate confirmation. Heard about the artificial flood and rationale behind same; occurs to me that if plague came from backed-up sewers, as currently favoured hypothesis seems to suggest, it can't have come from ship with all crew dead off the Cape; if so, what did they all die of, and surely a bit of a coincidence. Just thought I'd mention that.
Cordially, Bassano.

That made him wince. Not the water-borne theory, then; in which case, diverting the river and flooding the City had been a complete waste of time.

But enough doubt had been cast on his airborne theory to convince him that that had been wrong, too; in which case, everything he'd done had been pointless, and the City had survived in spite of his actions rather than because of them. Not that it mattered a damn, but...

If Bassano had figured it out, nobody else had. He waited for someone to mention it, but nobody said anything. Eventually, when he told Sentio, the look of total bewilderment and despair on his Chancellor's face told him that he hadn't just been keeping quiet out of respect for the First Citizen's feelings—

“We did all that,” Sentio whispered, “and it wasn't...”

“Apparently not, no.”

“Oh my God,” Sentio said, his eyes wide open. “What if someone finds out?”

Who, though? One rather wonderful side effect of the plague was that all his most intelligent enemies were dead. Cremutius and Saturninus had died on the first day. Moriscus, Bonosus, Faustinus and Laesianus, the Pupienus brothers; his loathsome cousin Balbinus, a thorn in his side since they were boys, with the added bonus that his wife, uncle and sons died with him, which meant Basso was his next of kin and inherited his very substantial estate, including nine hundred shares in the Shining Star Bank, which left it wide open to a hostile takeover. Olybrias had caught the plague but had recovered, though he'd lost the sight of one eye and most of his hearing, which was bound to curtail his trouble-making potential in both business and politics. The second tier of benefit was that their successors in the Optimate hierarchy were men like Pescennius, Macrianus and Numa, clowns, idiots; idiots who didn't realise they were idiots, by definition the very best sort. Until someone new managed to hack and slither his way up the ladder past these fools, the political opposition was effectively dead. Losses on his own side, by contrast, were almost indecently light, and most of them were men he'd have no trouble doing without: Leontius, who'd challenged him for the nomination; Praeclarus, who couldn't open his mouth without embarrassing the government; Gracilianus, who'd actually voted against him over the Auxentine war. If someone had given him thirty political assassinations of his choice for a birthday present, he couldn't have done better.

He wrote to Antigonus (who'd had it but survived; shrugged it off, they told him, like it was just a cold or something—not bad for a dying man). He wrote:

Buy land.

Not unreasonably, Antigonus wrote back:

What land?

Basso replied:

All of it.

Which Antigonus proceeded to do. First they drew down on cousin Balbinus' personal fortune. Then they took over the Shining Star and used its entire cash reserve. Then they had to start using their own money, but it didn't matter. With so many deaths, land prices were lower than anybody could remember, at least until word started to spread about the Bank's furious buying spree. A matter of weeks after the end of the plague, land prices were back where they'd been before the outbreak, and the First Citizen was commended by the House for his swift and effective intervention, which had saved the City from potential economic ruin. A certain amount of selling (at the restored prices) restored the Bank's liquidity, leaving Basso with—

"The good stuff," Antigonus said, looking up from the summary. "I'm impressed."

Basso shrugged. "It was the obvious thing to do."

"You were the one who did it."

"I had the money."

Antigonus, he thought, was looking better, if anything. The recent ferocious outburst of activity had done him good. The old man must have noticed him looking, because he grinned and said, "You're right. According to the doctors, the plague has actually slowed down the advance of the malignancy. Bizarre, was the word they used."

Basso smiled. "Maybe some of my luck's starting to rub off on you."

"Maybe." Antigonus frowned. "A few years ago, I saw a play about a man with a terminal disease. His enemies couldn't wait for it to take its course, so they hired an assassin. The man was stabbed, but he didn't die; in fact, the assassin's knife severed the tumour, which the doctors had said was inoperable, and the man made a full recovery."

"I remember that one," Basso said. "I thought it was silly."

“Really? It made me think of you. Basso’s luck, I thought.”

“What a strange thing to say.”

“You think so?” Antigonus shrugged. “I thought of you straight away. You have a knack of getting yourself into the most appalling trouble, which then turns out to your advantage. You might argue that a truly fortunate man wouldn’t get into the dreadful mess in the first place; he’d live a life of blameless, uneventful rectitude and eventually die, happy and obscure. You, on the other hand, have all the luck; the good sort and the bad. If your enemies took you out into the bay and threw you in the sea, you’d come up a few minutes later with a fistful of pearls.”

“My mother died,” Basso said. “Had you heard?”

Antigonus shook his head. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“So am I,” Basso replied, “but mostly because I realised I hardly felt anything when they told me. I waited for it to sink in, it has, and I still haven’t really felt anything. That’s appalling, don’t you think?”

“You should consider yourself lucky,” Antigonus replied. “One of the worst things that happens to a man has just happened to you, and you’ve escaped the suffering.”

Basso nodded. “Mostly,” he said, “it’s a nuisance; an inconvenience. For instance, I’m trying to remember something that happened when I was a kid. I think, I’ll ask Mother, and then I realise I can’t; it’s annoying, frustrating, it itches where I can’t reach, but it’s not *grief*. Unless I lie to myself, the most I can come up with is, it’s a loss of information, like a library burning down. There’s a whole chunk of my life for which I’m the only source of historical data—well, strictly speaking there’s my sister as well, but in practical terms there’s just me. It makes me feel, I don’t know, *vulnerable*. What happens when I get old and forgetful? All that part of me, my childhood, will be lost, for ever. I find that intensely disturbing.”

Antigonus touched the decanter. Basso shook his head. “You’re afraid,” Antigonus said, “that you’ve lost the capacity to feel. You’re worried you’re becoming callous and inhuman, and you blame yourself, because of what you’ve done.”

“Yes,” Basso said. “And?”

“Maybe you’re right,” he said. “Considering what you’ve done, the way you conduct your life, it’s not an unlikely outcome. But I believe you’ll cope.”

“Thank you so much.”

Antigonus smiled. “In fact,” he said, “I’m sure of it. Think. You lost part of your hearing when you were a boy. Later, when you were a young man, you lost most of the use of your left hand. But you’ve learned to adapt. You instinctively turn your head so as to listen with your good ear. You’ve acquired exceptional dexterity with your right hand, so you barely ever use your left. If you’ve lost the capacity to feel, I’m sure you’ll adapt. Knowing you, I imagine you’ll turn the loss into an advantage.”

Basso looked at him. “That’s a terrible thing to say.”

“And when I’m dead, who’ll be there to say terrible things to you?” Antigonus shook his head. “Which means you’ll miss me, and therefore you’ll remember me, and therefore I shall not wholly die, as the poets say. You know,” he went on, stretching out his feet, implying cramp. “I believe you’re the best investment I ever made. You didn’t cost me very much when you were young, and now you’re paying dividends.”

Basso laughed. “Delighted to hear I’ve come in useful at last. I always hoped I’d be good for something.”

But Antigonus was suddenly looking very serious. “I do worry,” he said, “about what’ll become of you after I’m dead. I think I’m the only person you’ve ever had any respect for—which, if true,” he added with a faint smile, “is enormously flattering, but it makes me wish I wasn’t going to die quite so soon. I believe there’ll be a crisis in your life, bigger and more dangerous than anything you’ve run into before, and I won’t be there to help. But there,” he said, making one of his rare big gestures, “I’m probably wrong and almost certainly overvaluing myself. I can’t actually recall a single instance where I’ve told you not to do something and you’ve listened to me, and things haven’t worked out so badly in spite of that.”

Basso didn’t say anything for a while. Then he changed the subject.

A priest called to see him. Usually he didn’t see priests without an appointment.

“My sister sent you,” Basso said.

The priest nodded. He was a tall man, not much older than Basso, with a strong, intelligent face. He didn’t seem at all happy about the job in hand.

“Thank you for finding the time to see me,” he said. “You must be very busy right now.”

“Yes,” Basso replied. “Sit down. You’re not allowed to drink alcohol on duty, are you?”

“Actually, that’s law-enforcement officers,” the priest said, “and I believe doctors. Since, in theory, a priest is never off duty...”

“Wine or brandy?”

“Brandy,” the priest replied immediately. “We don’t get that at the monastery. It’s classed as a luxury, therefore prohibited under our vow of poverty. Wine, on the other hand, is a necessity of life, even if it’s a thirty-year-old vintage Faralean.”

Basso poured out two glasses. “You’ve got a sense of humour,” he said. “I’d have thought that precluded you from being in my sister’s confidence.”

“She’s been quite extraordinarily generous to our foundation,” the priest said.

“Ah.” Basso nodded. “With my money.”

The priest seemed to have no opinion on that. Instead, he nibbled at his brandy and smiled.

“Do you know my nephew?” Basso asked.

“Indeed.” The priest put his glass down. “One of the most promising candidates in his year.”

Basso looked up. “One of?”

“He has the intellect,” the priest said, “and—what’s the right way of putting it?—he has the necessary disposition of mind. Not many people do,” he added. “And not many of them join the Order.”

“But?”

The priest shrugged. “A large part of being a priest is wanting to be a priest. I’m not talking about faith,” he added. “That’s a gift from the Invincible Sun, and not everyone is blessed with it. But wanting to be a priest is something rather different.”

“And Bassano doesn’t?”

The priest paused, then said, “He tells me you suggested it to him.”

“That’s right. For entirely secular reasons.”

“Perfectly good reasons,” the priest said. “A man can want to be a priest and still have no more interest in religion than—well, no disrespect: than you have.” Basso grinned at him. “Your nephew doesn’t seem to be

motivated by those reasons. Let me put it this way. He appreciates the holy offices for the quality of the words and the music—especially the music—and his attitude to the more worldly aspects of the vocation—property management, finances, that side of things—is that one should hire a good chief clerk and not get under his feet. Everybody likes him,” the priest added, almost involuntarily. “Even Father Prior, who doesn’t really like anybody.”

“Thank you,” Basso said. “Now, what’s my sister got to say?”

The priest hesitated, drank most of his brandy, and put the glass down. “She wants to know why you haven’t married anybody yet,” he said. “Also, she wants you to know how angry she is that her mother’s body was burned in the street in a common pyre, rather than decently buried in temple.”

Basso looked at him until he turned away. “I’ll answer the second point first,” he said. “My mother died of the plague. It’s the law that plague victims have to be burned, as soon as possible, and in any event no later than twenty-four hours after death. It’s a good law. My father passed it, as a matter of fact. I approve of it, and even if I didn’t, there’s nothing I could have done.”

The priest looked very sad. “I’m sure your sister would argue that since you’re the First Citizen, you could have found a way...”

“Precisely because I’m First Citizen, I had absolutely no choice in the matter.” He stopped, looked down at his hands, then went on: “I’m not inclined to argue the point with you, I’m afraid. There’s no earthly point in us having a debate about the issue, and I know my sister won’t change her view, no matter what anybody says to her. No offence,” he added.

“None taken.” The priest dipped his head in acknowledgement. “The other matter...”

Basso sighed. “We’ve just come out of a national disaster,” he said. “I’d have thought I’d be allowed a little extra time, considering. For one thing, I haven’t left this building since the plague struck. She’s got to admit, that’d cramp anybody’s style.”

“Your sister anticipated that line of argument,” the priest said carefully. “She instructs me to say that you have two months from today. Otherwise...”

“Otherwise what?”

The priest pulled a mournful face. "She didn't confide in me," he said. "Presumably you know."

"Yes." Basso closed his eyes for a moment. "Fine," he said. "Two months. Agreed." He looked up. "Anything else?"

"That was all."

"In that case, thank you. You did a perfectly wretched job very well."

The priest smiled and stood up. "Thank you very much for the brandy," he said.

"Take the bottle."

"I couldn't. I..."

"Take the bottle," Basso repeated, "and walk home slowly. So long as you don't actually take it into the Studium with you, I don't see where you'd be breaking any rules."

"I have to report back to your sister first," the priest said. "She has strong views..."

"Ah." Basso shrugged. "That I can well imagine. Give Bassano my regards."

There was a Day of National Grief. It rained. Not many people could be bothered to turn out for it; most of the citizens of the Republic had other things they needed to do. Compared with earlier outbreaks of plague, the death toll had been low. Even so, the fact remained that there were fewer pairs of hands to do the work, and extra work for which time had not been allowed in the daily routine.

Basso went straight from Temple to the House, where the finance committee were waiting for him. It was one of the Optimates' last surviving strongholds (they had a majority of two, left over from the old regime) and they were trying to make him reduce the gold content in the nomisma, from ninety-seven per cent fine to ninety-four, to cover increases in public spending without resorting to an emergency tax.

"No," Basso said. "If we start debasing now, we'll damage confidence overseas. Look what happened to the Auxentines when they tried it ten years ago."

"That was a ten-point debasement," someone replied. "We're only asking for three."

“And the Sclerians have increased the purity of theirs by two,” Basso pointed out, “with the result that we’re now paying four nomismata on the Sclerian drachma instead of three, which is way out of proportion to the actual gold content. The Sclerians are buying nomismata, melting them down and minting them into drachmas. It’s insane. If you cut the nomisma by three points, it’d be like writing the Sclerians a draft for half the reserves in the Treasury. No, what we ought to be doing is putting more gold in, not taking it out.” Then, when they scowled at him, he went on, “In fact, let’s do that. We’ll purify by one point, up to ninety-eight, and see what happens.”

They gave him a hard time over that, but he had the authority, and wouldn’t let them leave the room until they’d all signed the order, which was sent straight to the Mint for immediate action.

(“Why?” Sentio demanded later.

“Because they got on my nerves,” Basso replied. “Besides, it’s the right thing to do, especially now. It shows we’ve got confidence in the economy, in spite of our recent spot of bother. It’s all right,” he added, “the Bank’s got enough cash in hand to cover the immediate shortfall.”

Sentio shook his head. “Must be nice,” he said, “to be so rich you can personally guarantee something like this out of your own pocket.”

“Yes,” Basso said. “It is. It means I can indulge myself in little fits of temper without ruining the economy of the Republic.”)

Later that day, he announced his decision to the House, explaining in detail the many and complex factors that had led him to make the decision. To be sure, he said, in the short term, a debasement would have eased the public deficit quickly and relatively painlessly, but the long-term cost would, he believed, have been more than the Republic could afford, disproportionate to the short-term advantage, and causing lasting damage to the foreign trade on which the state depended. Instead, he proposed that both the deficit and the purification of the nomisma should be funded by an emergency tax; not a tax on private citizens, but on the larger corporations, those with a capital value in excess of one million nomismata.

When he was able to make himself heard again, he pointed out that he himself would be facing the biggest tax bill in the Republic. If the House saw fit to approve his proposal, he would find himself having to pay over to the Treasury more money than he’d inherited when his father died. He

wasn't asking anybody else to make anything like such a sacrifice. As far as he was concerned, it was the least he could do for the survivors of the plague, and he had sufficient faith in the integrity and public spirit of the House to recommend the proposal to them.

"Passed unanimously," Cinio said, after the session closed. "I'll have to look it up, but I think that's the first unanimous vote for seventy years."

Basso's hands, he noticed, were shaking slightly. "I certainly didn't make any new friends today," he said. "Did you see how they were glowering at me? I reckon I was lucky to get out of there in one piece."

"Was that true?" Cinio asked. "About your tax bill being bigger than your inheritance?"

"Perfectly true," Basso replied. "I wouldn't dare lie about something like that, not when I was making the grand gesture. Mind you, it's still considerably less than the profits we've made on short-term land deals." He grinned. "If we had an Opposition worth a damn, someone would've pointed that out, but I can only assume they're all too stupid to do simple arithmetic. Bonosus would've been onto it like a snake on a rat, God rest his insufferable soul."

Cinio looked at him. "You really want an effective Opposition?"

"Of course not," Basso said. "What I'd like is for everybody who disagrees with me about anything to get eaten by wild dogs. Otherwise I wouldn't be in politics."

He stayed late in his office in the House, dealing with the horrendous backlog of work that had built up during the emergency: bills to be signed into law, bills to be amended, diplomatic correspondence, viability assessments, interminable reports. As a reward to himself for being good and doing his homework, he wrote a letter to Bassano, though he hadn't yet figured out a way of getting it to him. While he was there, Tragazes called to see him; the twins were doing very well at the Bank, he said. They showed considerable promise.

"Good," Basso said. "What does that mean?"

Tragazes explained that they'd done all the work they'd been assigned quickly and efficiently, and that they'd been no trouble at all.

"And?"

That, Tragazes said, was all he had to report on the matter.

"So they're doing as they're told. I see, thank you. Please carry on."

The interview left him feeling vaguely depressed. He realised he must have been expecting considerably more of them, without quite knowing what. *I expected them to surprise me*, he told himself, *which is basically ridiculous*.

It was dark by the time he left. Ever since the time he'd escaped his escort and gone drinking, his guards had taken to treating him like a dangerous prisoner, on whom they daren't turn their backs for an instant. Usually he submitted meekly, since it really wasn't their fault. But he was still feeling out of sorts after his meeting with Tragazes; so, when he told the guard sergeant to take him home by way of the Rug Market instead of by the usual route and the sergeant replied that he was sorry but that wouldn't be possible, he lost his temper.

"Why the hell not?"

The sergeant looked deeply unhappy. "Operational reasons, First Citizen."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The sergeant didn't know, and why should he? "I'm very sorry, First Citizen, but I've got my orders. I can't..."

Basso scowled at him and stomped to the door where the covered chair was waiting. He was acting like a child, and knowing that made him angrier. "Come on, then, if we're going," he snapped, and slammed the door.

Four bearers, two torchbearers, six soldiers and the sergeant: thirteen grown men, just to see him safely home. He wriggled in the seat, trying to get comfortable, and ended up throwing the cushion out of the window. He saw the sergeant stoop and pick it up, which made him feel like an idiot. The sergeant handed it back, and he put it down on the seat beside him.

There were three alternative routes from the House to Basso's home; it was up to the sergeant to decide, on the spur of the moment, which one to take. Today, they were going across the Lion Square, through the Blue Portico, down Linenyard to the Winches, from which Basso deduced that the sergeant was a cautious, unimaginative man. He found his place in Machaeon's *Auxentine Paradoxes*, and started to read.

He was interrupted by a yell: a drunk, he assumed, or a lunatic, which meant they must be passing under the Portico, where those people tended to gather. But the chair stopped suddenly, and he heard a thump, a bit like a

nail being driven into wood. The chair tipped over; he grabbed at the door, then bashed his head against one of the uprights. Something touched his cheek, at the same time as another nail-in-wood noise. He opened his eyes, and saw a feather.

Odd place for a feather to be. Then he saw that it was one of three, the fletchings on a crossbow bolt, which had buried its head in the wood of the upright he'd been clinging to a second or so earlier. Made no sense. Who'd be stupid enough to go loosing off a crossbow in the middle of town?

The chair lurched again and hit the ground, jarring his back and knees, and he heard a scream, a man in great pain. Accident, he thought, we've been run into by a cart or something. No, because we're not on a carriageway. In which case—

He kicked open the door and slid out feet first onto the pavement (reddy-pink marble slabs; the Portico). As his head emerged through the chair door, he could see two pairs of legs, a soldier and someone else, a civilian. Another nail-in-wood noise, and the soldier fell over. He'd been shot.

Now he understood. Very bad. He had no idea what to do: try and run away, which would mean standing up in the open, or crawl back into the chair, very low-quality cover and he'd be trapped. He looked up, as a soldier rushed past him, banging Basso's shoulder with his knee. Then he went down too, with a bolt in the small of his back.

Someone yelled, "Where is he?" One of the torchbearers appeared out of nowhere; he was wrestling with a man, trying to twist a knife out of his hand, but he wasn't strong enough. The man punched the torchbearer in the stomach with his other hand, then stabbed him in the neck. As the torchbearer dropped to the ground, Basso and the man with the knife found they were staring straight at each other.

There was a moment when nothing happened. Then the man with the knife called out, "Here." He didn't move. Another man came up behind him. He had a deep cut on his cheek, from just below the ear to an inch short of his chin, and he was holding a hunting sword with a closed brass hilt. Oh, Basso thought.

The swordsman barged past the man with the knife and took a long stride forward. Basso tried to push himself backwards onto his feet, but the chair was in the way; he was stuck, on the ground. The swordsman drew

back the elbow of his sword arm, the first stage of a thrust. Without thinking, Basso shoved out his left hand, presumably to try and block, and saw a steel triangle appear through the back of it. No pain; just the enormous incongruity of seeing something coming at him through his hand, like some kind of conjuring trick.

The sword-point pulled away. As it left his hand, he felt a staggering wave of pain, which he forced himself to ignore. He could see the swordsman's elbow going back for another thrust. He scrabbled with his right hand for something to pull himself up by, and felt his fingers close in the soft fabric of the cushion. Why not? he thought, and threw the cushion at the swordsman's face.

The swordsman ducked out of the way, but he'd stopped his thrust, and Basso realised that he'd come half a pace closer in, as he moved his feet in avoiding the cushion. It was, in essence, a simple question of distance. If he was close enough, it might work. If not, that would be that. *Please*, Basso said to himself, and kicked out hard with his right leg.

He'd intended to kick the swordsman in the groin. Instead, he got his right knee, which turned out to be even better. The swordsman froze, just for a moment; then his right leg buckled, like a tree falling, and he collapsed, twisting sideways, bashing his head against the base of a pillar.

Basso arched his back, edging forward like a caterpillar, and pushed against the ground with his right hand. That got him on his feet, but the man with the knife was suddenly in his face, and he knew he wasn't going to be able to do anything quickly enough to stop the knifeman stabbing him. A pity. He waited.

It didn't happen. A man charged into the knifeman: the sergeant, with his sword drawn. The knifeman pivoted on his back leg, letting the sergeant pass him, and as he stumbled forward, the knifeman lifted his blade just a little and let the sergeant cut his own throat on it as he went past.

(I've read about that, Basso thought. There's a name for it, in Auxentine.)

The swordsman was getting up, but he'd dropped the hunting sword. The hilt was closer to Basso's hand than to his. Unfortunately, on Basso's left side; he snatched it up but it immediately fell out, the fingers refusing to close and grip, and clattered on the marble. He saw the swordsman dive for

it, and in the process block and get tangled up with the knifeman, whom he hadn't seen.

I could run, Basso thought. There may be just enough time.

He turned. Nobody in front of him, just an empty five yards of pavement to the Portico steps. He threw his weight forward and ran: four paces, and then he was falling, and then the pavement hit him like a trip-hammer.

A woman was standing over him, looking at him, frowning. There was a silver bowl in her left hand, and a sponge in her right.

He tried to remember what they'd taught him when he was a boy. Clearly not Victory; she holds a torch and a wreath, and wears a fiery garland. Charity has a bowl, but carries a banner on a long pole in the other hand. Mother Earth holds a basket, not a bowl. None of the goddesses or the allegorical personifications, to the best of his recollection, has a sponge. Also, for that matter, they tended to be younger. Prettier. Better dressed.

If you don't know, ask. "Who are you?" he said.

The woman didn't answer. She was ignoring him. Maybe, he thought, she's Death. The artistic convention was that Death was a tall king in black armour, but how the hell would anybody know? Maybe Death was a dowdy old woman with a bowl and a sponge.

"Are you...?" he started to say, but she'd left the room. Probably not Death, then. It occurred to him that maybe she was just a human. A (there's a word for it). A *nurse*.

He closed his eyes, because seeing is such a lot of effort, and when he opened them again, she was back. Beside her, an elderly man with a face like a cat. Doctor. Doctor?

"I'm sorry," he heard himself say, "I can't remember your name."

"Lystill," the doctor replied. Odd sort of a name. No, *lie still*. "You're all right. Concussion and two stab wounds in the lower back; amazingly, they missed everything important." The doctor frowned, almost reproachfully. "You were very lucky."

For some reason, that was really funny, but laughing hurt a lot. Not so funny after all. "They," he said, but the rest of the words wouldn't come

out. His head was suddenly cloudy, like a badly poured glass of wine. Lie still, he told himself. Good idea. Even better, go to—

“You wanted an effective Opposition,” said a voice from far above him. “I think you’ve got one.”

He opened his eyes. “Cinio,” he said.

The face began to take shape through the blur. “You’re lucky to be alive,” Cinio said.

Basso scowled at him. “Some of the most distinguished philosophers in history would disagree with you there,” he said. “Personally, I incline towards the later Formalist school, but only because they wrote in nice short sentences. What happened?”

Cinio’s face came closer, like the moon setting. “We still don’t know who they were,” he said. “But it was a very close shave. Well planned and well executed. Really, it’s a miracle you weren’t—”

“Yes,” Basso said, “thank you. That’s not what I asked. What *happened?*”

“Oh.” Cinio nodded. “They had crossbowmen in top-storey windows on either side of the Portico. They shot the bearers, and about a dozen men with knives and swords, we don’t know the exact number, rushed the guards. Somehow you got past them, because they found you lying a few yards away.”

“They?”

“Passers-by,” Cinio said. “They heard yelling and screaming and assumed there’d been an accident of some sort. When they got there, they saw this man standing over you with a sword, looking like he was finishing you off. Two or three of them rushed him—”

“Just a moment,” Basso interrupted. “You mean, ordinary people. People who just happened to be there.”

“That’s right.” Cinio nodded enthusiastically. “They got the man with the sword off you, but he killed two men and got away. The guards killed two of the bad guys, but the bodies haven’t given us anything to go on. The archers up in the windows dumped their bows and ran; we found the bows, but we didn’t catch anybody.”

“What about the guards? Did they see anything?”

“Probably,” Cinio replied, “but they aren’t telling. They didn’t make it. They got the torchbearers, too, and five civilians.”

“Five? You said...”

“There was quite a crowd. They had to cut their way through.”

Basso stared at him. “That’s eighteen people,” he said.

“That’s right. Really, it’s amazing that you—”

“Shut up, Cinio,” Basso said. “Listen, who knows about this?”

“Aelius, naturally. And the watch captains, and the gatekeepers; we’ve closed all the gates, so they can’t leave the city. Otherwise, we’re keeping it quiet, for now. We reckon we’ll have a better chance of catching them if—”

Basso shook his head. “I couldn’t give a damn about that,” he said. “But keep a lid on it for as long as you can. Officially I’ve come down with something debilitating but trivial—food poisoning, I don’t care. How long before I’m back on my feet, by the way?”

“Not sure,” Cinio said. “It’s so hard to pin these doctors down to anything definite. At least a fortnight.”

“The hell with that.” Basso tried to move, and discovered, much to his surprise, that he had no strength at all. “The point is,” he said, “I don’t want this to be public knowledge. Understand?”

Cinio looked at him. “I’m not sure we can—”

“I am. If there’s rumours, deny them. Food poisoning. And find some excuse for someone to come and see me, someone people’ll believe. The message is, I’m not dead, I’m a bit off-colour but I’ll be fine, nothing’s happened. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Cinio’s face made it obvious he was lying. “But that’s going to make catching the bad guys rather difficult, if we can’t—”

“I don’t want them caught. At least, I don’t care one way or another. They’re just some men who got paid to do a job of work.”

“But if we don’t catch the assassins,” Cinio said, a patiently-explaining-to-an-idiot voice, “we don’t stand much of a chance of finding out who hired them. Surely—”

“I’m not interested,” Basso said. “That’s the message. I don’t think we’re going to find out who planned this, even if we catch the hired hands. So, if I can’t catch them, I want to do the next-best thing.”

“Meaning?”

“I want to annoy them,” Basso said. “As much as possible.”

Cinio looked very sad. "I don't follow."

"Think about it," Basso said. "You've planned something like this. Against all the odds, it doesn't work, but you console yourself with the thought that, at the very least, the City'll be turned upside down, everybody'll be thrown into a panic, and you've put it in people's minds that the First Citizen was only a hair's breadth from being killed, and he might well not be so ridiculously lucky next time. That's at least a third of your objectives achieved. People who've been with me so far will start to think, what'll become of me if Basso gets killed and the other lot get in? What do you think'll happen to the Bank if people start thinking I might not be around this time next year?" He paused for a moment; his weak, useless body had caught up with him and he was completely out of breath. "Figure it out for yourself," he said. "There was no attempt on my life. A simple case of the running shits. I'll be up and back to work before you know it. All right?"

Cinio was obviously doing as he'd been told, thinking about it. "If you say so," he said. "I can't say I agree, though. We've got plans for a day of national thanksgiving for your miraculous escape. Services in Temple, a procession—"

"Go away," Basso said weakly. "You're making my head hurt."

Naturally, the rumour spread. Within twelve hours of the attack, it was everywhere. But when Chancellor Licinius stood up in the House to announce that the First Citizen was indisposed owing to a tiresome but minor gastric complaint—

Caelius Thraso, from the Optimate front bench, interrupted at this point. He was overjoyed, he said, to hear that the First Citizen's condition was relatively minor. He had heard a rather different version: that there had been a most deplorable, cowardly attempt on the First Citizen's life. Could the Chancellor categorically state...?

The Chancellor most certainly could. Food poisoning, in all probability picked up from tainted shellfish the First Citizen had eaten at the reception for the Mavortine ambassador. Several other guests at the reception had reported similar symptoms. The rumours (it was the first the Chancellor had heard of them) were entirely untrue. In future, the Chancellor added, the

noble gentleman might consider consulting official sources if he wanted to know the facts of a matter, rather than listening to idle bar-room chatter.

Nobody believed a word of it, of course; not for the first twenty-four hours. After that, they still didn't quite believe it, but they lost faith with the assassination story as well. Nobody, the argument ran, could try and cover up something as big as an attempt on the life of the head of state. Furthermore, why would anybody want to? Accordingly, simple logic required that there couldn't have been one. Therefore, whatever it was that was keeping Citizen Basso from doing his job, it wasn't the running shits and it wasn't multiple stab wounds either. Various theories, more or less lurid depending on the source, floated about for a day or so. Then Basso was seen riding in his chair from his home to the House, which was taken as an indication that the story, whatever the truth of it may have been, was now over.

Basso paid the compensation—ten thousand nomismata to the families of the guards, the bearers, the torchbearers and the dead civilians—out of his own pocket, and a further ten thousand to each of the men who'd stopped the assassin with the hunting sword from killing him. He handed the money over personally, just him and the recipient alone in a room together.

("How did it go?" Sentio asked him afterwards.

"Not well," Basso replied. "They were grateful." And that was all he had to say about the matter.)

By an extraordinary coincidence, it later emerged that two junior secretaries from the Chamber of Trade had indeed suffered food poisoning after the Mavortine reception, as a consequence of over-indulgence in marinated cuttlefish. For a while they were eagerly courted by senior Optimate figures, who wanted to know if they'd seen the First Citizen actually eating the stuff himself. They replied that they couldn't say for sure but they imagined he would have done, since marinated cuttlefish was a Mavortine delicacy and it'd have been impolite to refuse it. They, on the other hand, had each had four helpings, though they wouldn't be making that mistake again in a hurry. Shortly afterwards, there was a major reshuffle on the Optimate front bench; Caelius Thraso stepped down as deputy shadow chancellor, and the balance of power shifted a little towards

the centre. Since support for the Optimates was at its lowest level for forty years, however, it hardly seemed to matter very much.

Seven

“No, I’m not just feeling lonely,” Basso snapped. “And it’s a matter of the utmost urgency. Go and bloody well do as you’re told.”

It hadn’t been his idea to hire a social secretary. But he needed someone to do it. Antigonus had flatly refused; Scaevola, from the Protocol Office, had volunteered but was useless at everything; in desperation, he’d told Sentio to find him someone. He hadn’t expected a woman (“It’s not right,” he objected. “How can I shout at her when she does something wrong?”). But, according to Sentio, there were quite a few female clerks in Protocol these days, and they did a fine job; and really, so long as they weren’t citizens, where was the harm in it?

Melsuntha (her name was longer than that; you had to break a bit off if you were to stand any chance of saying it) turned out all right. She was thirty-one years old, free-born, a Mavortine but with only the faintest trace of an accent, and he found he could shout at her just fine. She didn’t seem to notice. She just stood or sat there till he’d finished, and then went on with what she was saying. Within the first hour of their acquaintance he’d nearly fired her three times. Two months later, he’d got used to her being there. When he heard she’d caught the plague, he was surprised by the slight lurch of fear he’d felt, and the pleasure when he heard she’d recovered.

“Fine,” she said. “You want me to find you a wife. What sort of timescale did you have in mind?”

“I told you, as soon as possible.”

She frowned. “Please be more specific. Months? Weeks? Days?”

No use. He was going to have to explain. "My sister's blackmailing me," he said. "She's going to marry one of my worst enemies if I don't get married myself in the next couple of months. I might just possibly get away with a formal betrothal in three months and one day, but that's about all the slack I can expect her to cut me. She can be rather vindictive sometimes."

She listened to that as if it had been the most reasonable thing in the world. "You'd better give me the criteria," she said. "I assume you want to make the best deal possible as far as political and business alliances are concerned."

He frowned. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I suppose I ought to. After all, it's my trademark, turning disasters into opportunities."

She looked at him. "You classify marriage as a disaster?"

That made him laugh. "In my admittedly limited experience, yes. You know about me, do you?"

"Everybody knows that," she said.

They discussed criteria for a while, and she made some extremely sensible suggestions. He hadn't expected she'd be quite so well informed about politics and commerce.

"I listen," she said. "I have excellent hearing. And people don't notice I'm in the room."

He found that hard to believe. "Well," he said, "we've got some possibilities there, I suppose. Now there's the question of how we're going to set about it."

"Excuse me?"

He thought about the choice of words. "The courtship procedure," he said. "As you know, there are protocols. Unfortunately, they don't help us much. Normally, where it's a political or dynastic marriage, the negotiations are carried out between the heads of the families. But that's going to be awkward here, because I'm the head of our family, and it'd be a breach of etiquette, not to mention hideously embarrassing, for me to negotiate on my own behalf."

She frowned. "I see," she said. "Excuse me, but that's a curious gap in the system. Surely you can't be the first head of family in history to be looking for a wife."

"It's very rare, actually," he said. "The assumption is, a head of family's already thoroughly married. If their wives die, they're not really supposed

to marry again, it messes up the existing arrangements. I imagine that was one of the reasons my sister came up with the idea; the maximum embarrassment for the minimum effort.”

She nodded. “In that case,” she said, “we’ll have to innovate. The simplest thing would be for me to open negotiations as your representative.”

He thought about that. “Actually,” he said, “that’s not a bad idea. You’re completely outside the family structure, so there’s no real scope for taking umbrage. Yes, all right, do that. Mind you,” he added, “I wouldn’t want your job.”

She didn’t react to that. “I’ll draft a standard letter for your approval,” she said. “I expect there’s a form of words in one of the books of precedents that I can adapt. Please let me know if there are more names you’d like me to add to the list.”

He felt strangely let down, as if a traumatic but exciting thing he’d been expecting to happen had been cancelled at the last moment. “Fine,” he said. “Right, you get on and do that. It’ll be interesting to see what reactions you’ll get.”

She was gathering up her papers, putting them away in the appropriate files. “One other thing,” he said.

“Yes?”

He frowned. “I’ve been calling you Melsuntha all this time. Is that actually your name?”

She looked up. “Since you ask,” she said, “no.”

“Oh.”

“It’s complicated.” She put the files back on the desk. “Where I come from, names serve a different purpose. They convey information.”

“Same here,” he said. “I’m Bassianus Honorius Arcadius Severus; that tells you who my father and mother and paternal grandfather were, and people call me Basso for short.”

She sort-of-smiled. “That’s a very simplistic way to use names,” she said. “My name is Elagabil-Manzicert-Rusinholet-Melsuntha. The Melsuntha part merely tells you that I’m an unmarried woman, of good family but without a title.”

“Ah,” Basso said. “Sorry,” he added. “So really it’s more of an adjective than a name.”

“Oh no.” She shook her head. “It’s a name all right, or part of one. Lotheir-Melsuntha’s the heroine of one of our oldest verse dramas, and she happens to be an unmarried woman of good family but without a title. There are several other heroines of literature whose names are used in the same way. I could just as easily have been called Kerimheltha or Berineld; they’d have meant the same thing. But my *name*,” she went on, “is Elagabil.”

“Ah.” He pursed his lips. “And the other bits?”

She smiled properly this time. “Manzicert is an obscure folk heroine associated with the region where my family originated; not where they live now, of course, but where they came from. Rusinhollet is the patron goddess of the clan with whom our clan, the Gabil, have traditionally been allied. Ela signifies that my mother wasn’t from the Gabil clan. Because Rusinhollet comes after Manzicert, that means that we as a family no longer live where we used to. The fact that Manzicert was chosen as the regional identifier rather than one of the better-known folk heroines from our area—there are at least a dozen—tells you that our family occupies a rather junior role in the clan hierarchy. One of my people would be able to interpret the nuances quite precisely.” She folded her arms. “There’s rather more to it than that,” she said, “but I won’t bore you with the more abstruse elements. I just wanted to give you an overview.”

“I see,” Basso said. “Thanks. So, what should I call you?”

She stood up. “Melsuntha will do fine,” she said. “We’re both used to it by now. Is that everything for today?”

The refusals were, for the most part, perfectly polite; she was still rather young to be thinking about marriage, or she was already as good as betrothed to someone else, or they were deeply flattered and honoured that the First Citizen should consider their daughter in that light, but perhaps the difference in ages—

“The hell with that,” Basso growled. “She’s three years younger than me. You’d have thought they’d have done anything to get her off their hands.”

Melsuntha didn’t seem to have heard him. “There’s also a list of seventeen character flaws.”

“Hers or mine?”

“Hers. She’s frivolous, easily bored, and she bites her fingernails.”

“That’s a bad habit,” Basso pointed out, “not a character flaw.”

“But possibly symptomatic of a deep-seated neurosis,” she replied.

“Anyway, they feel she’s entirely unsuitable, and therefore feel obliged to decline.”

Basso sighed. “Just as well,” he said. “I remember her as a child. She used to pick the petals off flowers. I always thought that was a stupid thing to do.”

“That’s all so far,” Melsuntha said. “We’re still waiting to hear from the Quintillii, the Metelli and the Sulpicii, though I can’t say I hold out much hope. If they were at all interested—”

“I’m not surprised,” Basso said, looking away. “After all, I killed my first wife. Who the hell’s going to make their daughter marry me?”

She looked at him. “In my country,” she said, “you would have incurred social stigma if you hadn’t killed them.”

“Really.” He looked right back at her. “Then I’m very glad I don’t live there.”

He’d offended her, in so far as that was possible. He felt slightly ashamed. “Private justice is frowned on here,” he said. “What I should have done is sue for a divorce, claiming her dowry as forfeit for gross misconduct, and sued my brother-in-law for seducing my wife, for which I’d have got substantial damages. But he came at me with a knife, so what could I do?”

She didn’t point out the flaw in that argument; she didn’t need to, just as she wouldn’t need to point out the sun on a cloudless day. “Even so,” she said, “I fail to see why your unhappy past should stand in the way of a second marriage. You aren’t the same man you were then.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “How would you know?”

“I don’t believe you would act the same way were the situation to arise again.”

He frowned at her. “Congratulations,” he said, “on your mastery of the subjunctive. Seems to me, the only people who know how to use it properly these days are foreigners. Also, you’re talking rubbish. You don’t know the first thing about me.”

She stood up to leave. “Thank you,” she said, “for the compliment. I am quite proud of my competence in your language. For example, I can tell the difference in nuance between ‘I believe there’s nothing you can’t do’ and ‘I believe you’re capable of anything’. Both of which,” she added, “are true. Good afternoon.”

After she’d gone, he smiled.

The House, of its own motion, voted Basso the titles “Saviour of the People” and “Father of His Country”, in recognition of his actions during the plague emergency. He wrote a formal letter of thanks, which was read in his absence, but politely refused to allow a service of investiture and thanksgiving in Temple. The remark attributed to him on hearing of these honours—“If I’m the father of the country, no wonder people abroad say all Vesani are bastards”—is probably apocryphal; the earliest mention of it is to be found in Sertorius’ *Commentaries*, written seventy years after the event.

“It bothers me, though,” he said, at the end of a long and rather fraught cabinet meeting, during which tempers had frayed and been patched up two or three times. “Saviour of the people, for crying out loud. We now know that everything we did was useless.”

“True,” Sentio said. “But at least you did something.”

“Something useless.”

“You did *something*, though,” Sentio insisted. “You did a *lot*. People appreciate that.”

“Think of the last major dose of plague we had,” Cinio pointed out. “They were dropping like flies in the streets, you couldn’t get a cart up Cornmarket for the piles of dead bodies, and all First Citizen Macrianus could think about was making sure nobody came within five hundred yards of his front door. He had the army out shooting arrows at people.”

Basso shrugged. “So as long as I *do* things, it doesn’t matter if they’re a waste of time and money. That’s—”

“That’s what people expect of you,” Cinio said. “It helps if it doesn’t actually make things worse, of course, but what counts is action. As you well know,” he added. “Just as you know that you’ve got to be gracious about fancy titles when you’re given them, or they’ll say you’re arrogant.”

Basso sighed. "The stupid thing is," he said, "I actually would quite like to be called something. You know, like Hanno the Great or Meo the Wise. It's fatuous and really rather pathetic, but there it is. I'd even settle for Basso the Deaf, so long as people thought of it for themselves."

Lanio, the trade commissioner, raised an eyebrow. "You surprise me," he said. "I've always assumed the line was, 'I do what I believe is right and I don't give a damn what people think.' I've always assumed that's why you're so popular. People like that sort of attitude."

"It cuts both ways, remember," put in Dorico, the chief agent. "Take your man Aelius, for instance. He'll be Cowshit to the end of his days, long after everyone's forgotten that a victory went with it."

"Let's talk about something else," Basso said.

"All right," Cinio replied. "How about the labour shortage? We still haven't decided anything," he went on, raising his voice above the groans of his colleagues. "And unless we do something now—"

"Like you were saying just now," Sentio interrupted. "Do something, even if it's pointless. The phantom of achievement, swathed in the illusion of activity."

Cinio turned to look at him. "Yours?"

Sentio shook his head. "Marcianus," he replied, "*On Citizenship*. I'd have thought you'd have recognised it."

"I'm sorry," Cinio said, "I don't read that sort of thing."

"You quoted from it," Sentio replied. "Last month, in the—"

Basso cleared his throat. "Let me see if I've got this straight." They turned to look at him. "We all agree that the labour shortage caused by the plague can't be allowed to continue much longer. Cinio and Tullio and their friends want us to buy in slaves and either sell them on to businesses and private citizens at cost, or hire them out at sensible rates. Sentio, Dorico and the pump-house lobby" (Sentio frowned at this description) "object that the ratio of slaves and foreigners is already too high, and this'd tip it just a bit too far. Is that about it, or have I missed something?"

Sentio muttered something about gross oversimplification, but Basso ignored him. "You've been on at me all day to say what I think," he said, "and I've avoided the issue, which is why we're all still here instead of where we want to be. All right. I agree with both of you."

There was a short pause; then Dorico muttered, “That’s a great help, I must say.” Basso smiled at him.

“Sentio,” he said, “doesn’t object to the buying-in plan per se. He’s just worried about the balance. Cinio’s turning a blind eye to a perfectly valid point, but I think his approach is basically sound, though I’d disagree with one aspect of it.” He hesitated, as though he wasn’t quite sure he wanted to continue. Then he said: “I don’t think we should bring in slaves. There are far too many as it is, and I think we’re laying up trouble for the future. In fact, I believe we should be looking towards getting rid of slavery altogether; but” (he had to raise his voice a little at that point) “that’s another bitter argument for another long and tiresome day. I think we should recruit free labour abroad and hire it out—Cinio’s plan, but with a slight tweak.”

There was a cold silence. Then Sentio said, “If I’m going deaf I’m in good company, but I thought I heard you say our objection was valid.”

“It is.” Basso nodded. “The balance is all wrong. Particularly now,” he added, “since by a nasty quirk of statistics, we lost twice as many citizens as offcomers in the plague. Add to that the steady decline in the birth rate, and we’ve got to face the fact. There’s a genuine risk that, sooner or later, we’re going to run out of Vesani.”

“There you are, then,” Sentio snapped. “So you can’t seriously be suggesting—”

Basso raised his left hand. These days, that was all it was good for. “We have a shortage of Vesani citizens,” he said. “Fine. Let’s make some. I propose that we extend the franchise.”

No buzz of voices, angry, incredulous or anything. Stone-cold silence.

“I thought you’d take it like that,” Basso said pleasantly. “But what the hell. I’m suggesting we give automatic citizenship to all soldiers who’ve served at least seven years, to all foreigners who’ve lived here for more than fifteen years—” (it occurred to him: she told me once she was eighteen when she arrived here) “—and all foreigners employed for more than five years in government service. Excluding, of course, criminals and lunatics. Right,” he said, and folded his arms. “Please don’t all shout at once.”

After a very, very long pause, Sentio said: “You’re serious.”

“Yes.”

Sentio stood up. "In that case," he said, "it's been an honour working with you. I'll be going now."

"Shut up and sit down," Basso said, and Sentio, after a moment's hesitation, sat down. "Think about it, for crying out loud. If you paid even slightly more attention than I did to history lectures at school, you'll know that we're not exactly pure-bred stock, not like the Auxentines or the Sclerians. We're bits and pieces from all over, the sweepings of the granary floor, as my grandfather used to say. We need more citizens. We need them to work, to pay taxes, to row galleys in the fleet, to marry and have lots of little Vesani; otherwise, we're going to dwindle away until we're so frail we'll be easy prey for a revolution or a slave revolt." He paused to draw breath, and look at the faces round the table. "Another point you may care to consider," he went on. "If we give the vote to ten thousand or so hitherto excluded and marginalised people, who do you think they're going to vote for? The Optimates?"

A shorter silence. Dorico said, "That's a good point."

"Besides," Basso continued, "there's the balance that Sentio's so keen on. If the Republic's to survive, it's got to keep growing. That means more labour, which means people coming in from outside. Sentio's quite right about the importance of the balance. It's not just a here-and-now problem caused by the plague; it's going to be with us for the foreseeable future, so we'd do well to fix it now. What I'm suggesting is a system for maintaining that balance automatically, so we won't ever have to have a dreary debate like today ever again."

Lanio said: "We should've guessed something like this was coming when he started banging on about wanting to be Basso the Great. And now look." He drew a great sigh, right down to the soles of his feet. "Actually, it makes sense. God only knows how you're planning to get it past the House."

"That's my business," Basso said. "Dorico? What do you reckon?"

"I like the idea of ten thousand guaranteed votes. Where did that ten thousand figure come from, by the way?"

"The top of my head," Basso replied. "But it's probably not far off. Cinio?"

"I think you're out of your mind," Cinio said. "But if that's what you want to do, I'll back you."

“Really?” Basso said. “Why?”

Cinio shrugged. “Because I like being Chancellor,” he said. “And if I don’t support you, I won’t be. Well, is that right?”

“Of course. Sentio? How about it?”

While he was waiting for an answer, he turned his head slightly and looked at the wall. He’d stared at it many times, but for some reason he’d never noticed the portrait of his great-great-grandfather, First Citizen a hundred years earlier. It stood to reason there’d be one, of course; all the First Citizens were there, in gilded ovals, a critical, disapproving audience. Laurentius Severus looks just like me, he thought; same idiot lower lip, same nose, same V-shaped fold above the junction of the eyebrows, permanently frowning, as though everything ever said to him was too ridiculous for words. He’d never seen a portrait of him before, apart from a meaningless silhouette on an old copper liard he’d got in his change.

“All right,” Sentio said eventually. “I guess it serves me right for being difficult. And I’ve been sitting here trying to think of a good argument against it, and for some reason I can’t; all I can think of is the sort of stuff you’ll get thrown at you in the House, about the integrity of the Republic and betraying the trust of our ancestors.” Suddenly he grinned. “Just saying it makes me sound like a bloody Optimate. At least we can enjoy ourselves making them look stupid in the debate.”

“What better reason could there possibly be?” Basso said graciously.

“Why?” Antigonus said.

“It’s obvious, surely.” Basso had picked a rose from the standard outside the back entrance, where there was a small, irrelevant garden. Carefully he lifted the dying flowers from the vase on the windowsill and put his rose in there instead. “If we’re going to go ahead with the new shipyard, we’ll need a lot of extra workers; skilled men, not just labourers. The obvious place to get them from is Auxentia, but they’re not going to uproot themselves and come over here with their families and everything if they reckon they’ll be little better than indentured servants. This’ll give them the incentive: come over here, stay long enough, and they get the citizenship. Simple as that.”

Antigonus nodded slowly. “I’ll say this for you,” he said. “You’re not short on self-confidence. Change the nature of the Republic for ever, just so

you can have your shipyard.”

“My monopoly on shipbuilding, you mean.”

“Exactly. No lack of belief in yourself.” Antigonus paused to catch his breath. It didn’t take much, these days. “There’s one thing you may not have considered.”

“Well?”

“If your wonderful scheme goes ahead, that’ll mean I’ll be a citizen too.”

Basso felt as if he’d just walked into something in the dark. “That’s something you want.”

“Yes, as it happens.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“It’s not something that someone like me asks for.” Antigonus made a vague gesture with his hand. “Don’t worry about it,” he said, “I certainly don’t hold it against you. It’s just a silly notion of mine. Like you,” he added, “wanting to be Basso the Great.”

“I wish I’d never opened my mouth,” Basso said sourly. “Anyway, I’m happy for you, and you deserve it. Like Aelius; bloody stupid that a man like him—and you, of course—should be a second-class human being in the eyes of the law.”

Antigonus looked at him; you made Aelius a citizen, he didn’t say. “Fortunate,” he said, “that righting a social injustice should fit in with your plans. Like the free bunch of grapes you get when you buy a bushel of olives.”

“Does it matter?”

“No.” Antigonus shrugged. “You have the knack of being able to do what you want, and then finding excellent reasons for it afterwards. No, that’s not it; you do something for *your* reason, and it turns out that it was the right thing to do anyway. Why are you doing this, by the way? It’s not because of the shipyard, and it’s not for the public good.” He paused, then added, “Or can’t you tell me?”

“No,” Basso said. “Does that matter?”

“Of course not. What matters is the outcome, not the intention. You produce very good outcomes, so who cares?” He smiled, and Basso knew that he’d given offence and been forgiven. “I’ve got a name for you, though. Basso the Lucky. Will that do?”

“Perfectly.”

The Lady Tertullia Placidia was late for the appointment.

“I was playing dice with the Sulpicii sisters,” she explained, taking off her gloves. Her hands were long and pale. “Renzia needed double five to go out, but she couldn’t make it.” She sat down on the straight-backed gilded chair his mother had always favoured, and smiled at him. “This is rather unusual, isn’t it?”

He sat down opposite her. There wasn’t much in the way of cover: a small table with a potted fern on it, a tall wrought-iron lampstand his grandfather had brought back from Eschia. Aelius, he felt, would approve. Fight your pitched battles in the open, he’d once heard him say.

“This isn’t your usual sort of marriage,” he said. “Given the circumstances, I thought it’d probably be just as well if you got a good look at me before we take things any further.”

“Ah.” She nodded; conceding that he had a point, though she didn’t necessarily agree. “Well, my father’s quite keen...”

“I know,” Basso said. “But that’s all politics and business. I thought you might like to make your own mind up. If you decide you’d rather be dead in a ditch, I’ll break off the negotiations. Tactfully, of course.”

“It’s not up to me,” she said; then she fell silent, aware that she’d spoken before thinking about her choice of words. “I mean, naturally I rely on my parents’ judgement. They wouldn’t marry me off to a monster, after all. I’m their daughter.”

Basso shrugged. “My father married my sister to a drunken idiot who sniffed round anything in a skirt,” he replied. “He needed the money. Your father needs money. Or didn’t you know that?”

Her face answered for her. “I have no idea,” she said. “That’s none of my business.”

“And my parents married me to a whore,” he added pleasantly. “Two disasters out of two. Which is probably why I don’t have as much confidence in the system as you do.”

She was looking at him. Probably, he decided, just as well. Plazidio was a political ally and a sort of a business partner; he always reminded Basso of the little birds who make their living by picking the teeth of crocodiles.

His daughter, fortunately, took after her mother in appearance. The disconcerting thing was, he'd had a crush on Hostilia Tertullina when they were both fifteen. Being married to her daughter, who looked so very like her, would be rather bewildering.

"Mother says you and she were great friends once," she said.

"That's one way of putting it," Basso said. "I seem to remember her saying to me once that she wouldn't go to the Ascension Ball with me if I was the last living creature on earth. I could see her point," he added quickly. "I wasn't much to look at even then. Also, I'm deaf in one ear and your mother's very softly spoken. She got sick to death of having to say everything twice."

"Are those honey-cakes?" she said in a very clear voice, looking past him to the table next to the wall. "I adore honey-cakes, and it's so hard to get proper ones, with cinnamon."

He stood up and fetched the plate. She took two. He tried to take one for himself, but he used his left hand. It slipped through his fingertips and landed on the floor. She tried to look as though she hadn't noticed; and he recognised that look. So her father drinks, he thought, I must remember that.

"I'm afraid this hand's not much good for anything," he said. "It got cut up in a fight when I was young."

"Poor you," she said. "It must be terribly inconvenient."

"Most of the time, no," he replied. "Just occasionally, like then."

"You've learned to adapt."

He smiled. "People can adapt to most things," he said. "Which doesn't mean they should have to. There's no merit in it."

She didn't reply to that, partly because her mouth was full of cake. She was very beautiful when she ate; just like her mother at her age. Last he'd heard, she'd got as fat as a pig. "Your brother," he said. "He's reading for the priesthood, isn't he?"

"That's right," she said. "In his second year."

"My nephew's at the Studium."

"I know." She nodded. "My brother's in the same class for Ethics and Accountancy. He's got the same name as you, hasn't he? Bassianus?"

"We call him Bassano in the family," Basso replied. "Less confusing."

"He's always top in everything, my brother says."

(And he thought: she's talking to the wrong Bassianus; though I don't suppose Bassano would be all that bothered. He'd want someone with a bit more flavour, even just for polite flirtation. What I ever saw in her mother I can't imagine.) "He's a smart boy," Basso replied. "But I don't see him as a priest."

"Oh? Why not?"

"He's too spiritual."

She wasn't sure if that was supposed to be a joke, and he couldn't blame her. "And he's lazy," he went on, "though I'm hoping that's just his age." No offence taken, by the look of it; she'd be, what, six months younger than him? "I believe he's the sort of young man who'll take a long time to settle to anything, but when he does, he'll do it well. I'm not like that. I started in business when I was younger than he is now. I couldn't see the point in youth."

"Oh." She looked at him as if he was one of those street preachers. "Isn't it supposed to be the happiest time of your life?"

"Maybe. I didn't think so. Couldn't wait to get rid of it, to be honest with you."

"It's different for men," she said gamely. Had to give her credit for making some sort of a fight of it.

"I suppose so," he said. "It's rather an unfair advantage, if you ask me. Women are only allowed twenty-five years to find happiness, if that. Men can take twice as long. But I couldn't see the point in wasting time like that. It's different for someone like my nephew, of course. He's got charm and good looks, so being young suits him." Like a girl, he didn't need to add.

"Can I have another one of those cakes? They're really good."

He managed to keep from smiling. A sensible young woman, he decided, after all; load up on the cakes while they're going, and the day won't have been completely wasted. "Help yourself," he said. "Our cook made them. I'll get him to send you round a couple of dozen."

The Twenty-Second Law of Bassianus Severus, more usually referred to as the Enfranchisement Act, scraped through the House like, as Basso put it, a fat dog squeezing through railings. To general surprise, the faction led by Tertullius voted against, whereas the law received unexpected support from

Olybrias and his hard-core Optimates. The two surprises effectively cancelled each other out, and Basso won by a margin of six wards.

“Why?” he asked later.

The priest—Basso had taken the trouble to find out his name, since it seemed like they’d be seeing a lot of each other in the future: Chrysophilus—made his distinctive don’t-blame-me gesture. “Your sister,” he said, “felt that if you lost the vote, your government would probably fall.”

“Unlikely,” Basso interrupted. “But so what? She’d want that, surely.”

“Not,” Chrysophilus said, “under those circumstances.” He hesitated, and Basso read the pause as “I owe her my loyalty, but I like you more than her.” “To be blunt,” he said, “she wants to be the sole author of all your misfortunes. If your government falls, she’d like it to be because she made it happen. I’m sorry,” he added quickly, “but that’s the way she thinks.”

Basso nodded slowly. “I know,” he said. “She’s as jealous in hate as normal people are in love. Not your fault,” he said brightly. “Have another brandy.”

Chrysophilus hesitated for as long as he could; five seconds. “Thanks,” he said, “I think I will. There are times when the wishes of my patroness...”

“Quite.” Basso poured a large measure. “So she told Olybrias to save my neck, so she could have the pleasure of stretching it later.”

“More or less,” the young priest replied, after he’d swallowed his drink. “I believe her instructions were that he was to vote with you if there seemed like there was a serious risk that you’d fail. Otherwise, he was to vote against.”

“Bless her,” Basso said. “She’s a bit like her mother. By and large a kind-hearted woman, but when she wanted to, she could spin out a grudge like a tramp with a drink in a bar. Talking of which,” he added, lifting the decanter. Chrysophilus smiled and shook his head.

“You put up with a lot from her,” he said.

“She’s my sister,” Basso replied. “I’d do anything to make her happy, except I don’t think she’s capable of happiness. Well, almost anything. I draw the line at cutting my own throat.”

Chrysophilus smiled weakly. “One must draw the line somewhere, I agree. I can’t help thinking, though, that your forbearance—”

“Forbearance has got nothing to do with it,” Basso cut him off. “I ruined her life—not intentionally, in self-defence and maybe she’s contributed to it

a bit, but that doesn't matter. She's entitled to want to hurt me, which is why I let her do it. You don't think I couldn't stop her if I wanted to." He stopped talking, looked up at the ceiling. "There's a thing," he said. "You're a priest, and this room contains some of the finest examples of pre-Reformation religious art in the City. Had you noticed?"

"I'm not an art person," Chrysophilus replied. "Wasted on me, I'm afraid."

"We used to use it as a lumber room," Basso said. "Which is probably how it survived. If we'd ever come in here, we'd have redecorated, a hundred years ago, and now you'd probably have cheerful hunting scenes or tasteful shepherdesses on the walls instead of some of the most sublime expressions of the human spirit you'd ever hope to find. When I was a kid, my mother had a full-sized Advancing Victory by Sositheus smashed into gravel for the herb garden path. Waste not, want not, she said, and she didn't like old-fashioned ornaments. With the possible exception of my nephew and myself, my family..." He shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said, "I'm being embarrassing. You don't want to hear me moaning about my family."

"I understand," Chrysophilus said. "It's often easier to talk to strangers."

"I find it easiest to talk to my enemies," Basso said. "Of whom, technically, you're one. Which reminds me. Please be good enough to tell my sister that I'll be getting married at the end of the month."

"Congratulations," Chrysophilus said automatically, which made Basso smile. "So, you were able to find a suitable—"

"Not a suitable." A private-joke grin, width but no depth. "But she fits my sister's criteria. Which reminds me, I must remember to tell her. Another brandy before you go?"

"Why?" she asked.

Not a reaction he'd have expected from anybody else. From Melsuntha, it made sense.

"Personally," he said, "I'm very much a leg man, unlike my father and my two sons, all of whom belong to the mammary school of human beauty. My first wife—"

"Why?" she repeated.

“I haven’t had sex since my wife died. It’s been a long time.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “Maybe because you’re one of the few women I’ve met who, on receiving a proposal of marriage from the First Citizen, who also happens to be the richest man in Vesania, would ask that question. Most women would say yes. Sensible women who know me or know about me would say no. But *why* puts you in a rather special category.”

She looked at him. “Originality of mind,” she said. “Is that why you want to marry me?”

“To annoy my sister,” he said.

She nodded. “Better,” she said. “But still not good enough, I’m afraid.”

He grinned at her. “Answer my question and I’ll answer yours.”

“I’m afraid my answer depends on yours,” she said. “Therefore—”

“Fine.” He looked at, then past her. “Do you know why I passed the Enfranchisement Act?”

She shook her head. “No. Do you?”

That made him laugh. “Actually, yes. So I could marry someone who, before the Act was passed, wasn’t a citizen and therefore couldn’t marry me.”

Her face was stern, full of concentration. “That’s very romantic,” she said, “but it doesn’t answer my question.”

“Love?”

She shook her head. “You love your nephew,” she said, “and your sister. I believe you feel a degree of affection for the old eunuch Antigonus; at least, you’ll miss him when he’s dead, and not just because he’s such a good worker. You may have loved your wife—it would explain why you killed her—but not in the sense most people understand the word.”

“And my mother,” Basso said.

“You may believe that, but I doubt it. You don’t love your sons; mostly, I think, because of their mother. Excuse me if I find it hard to believe that you could possibly love me.”

He turned his head sideways and looked at the ground for a moment. Those who knew him well recognised that as a sign that he was structuring his case before speaking. “You know why I haven’t had sex since I killed my wife? Not guilt, as such. More that I really couldn’t summon up the

enthusiasm, and why should I do something that's supposed to be fun if I didn't want to?"

"And I've changed all that, I suppose?"

"I'm trying to answer the point you made," he said irritably. "Am I capable of loving someone? The answer is, I really don't know. Until recently, you might as well have asked me, Can you hold your breath underwater for two minutes? I don't know, and I really don't want to find out."

She raised an eyebrow. "I'm not familiar with courtship protocols in your culture," she said. "But this isn't how a man proposes marriage where I come from."

"You asked why," he said. "I'm trying to explain, but you keep interrupting."

She shrugged. "Men always take so long to say things," she said. "Not just you, men in general."

"That's because we think before we speak."

"And while you're speaking. You always like to finish your sentences, even when it's obvious what the end's going to be. I find that very strange."

Basso frowned at her. "Fine," he said. "On behalf of all men everywhere, I apologise. Look, if you're going to say no, please do it now. I'm finding this painfully embarrassing."

"We agreed," she said. "I'll answer your question after you've answered mine."

He took a deep breath, as though he was about to try and lift something heavy. "Why," he said. "Well, there's several reasons. As you know, I've got to get married because my sister's blackmailing me. All the women of my own class that we've been considering as potential wives either don't want anything to do with me, or else bore me to death. I know that's not a particularly good reason—"

"On the contrary," she interrupted. "Marriages of convenience are often the most sensible way to resolve a particular difficulty." She looked at him thoughtfully. "If I thought that was the only reason, I'd probably accept."

He smiled thinly. "If that was the only reason," he said, "I'd have asked someone else."

"Another reason, please."

"I wouldn't be afraid," he said.

“Afraid,” she repeated. “Of what?”

“Of another day like the worst day of my life.”

She gave him one of her businesslike looks. “I can reassure you on that point,” she said. “Adultery is reckoned to be a major sin in my culture. Also,” she added, “I wouldn’t want to get killed. I can see why that would be a substantial reason, though predicated on the first.”

He looked at her. “Predicated?”

“Did I use the wrong word? I’m sorry. I meant it to mean, it’s only a good reason in the context of the first one.”

He nodded. “But if it was just a marriage of convenience, I don’t think the situation would arise. I don’t think I could murder someone I didn’t love.”

“Ah.” She frowned a little. “We come back to that, then. Is that your third reason?”

He closed his eyes wearily. “I wish you’d just say yes or no,” he said.

“At this point, I would have to say no. But I’m prepared to listen to a fourth reason, if you have one.”

He opened his eyes wide. “You’d do well in business,” he said.

“Was that a reason?”

“No, an observation.”

“Ah. I’d have accepted that as a reason.”

“It’s not on offer.”

She shrugged. “Well?”

“Because,” he said, “usually I only shout at someone once. If I need to shout at them, it follows that I can’t be doing with them. They get fired, or reassigned, so I don’t have to deal with them any more.” He paused. “I shout at you a lot.”

“That’s your fourth reason?”

“I suppose it is.”

“In that case...” She leaned forward a little, kissed the tip of her index finger and rested it lightly on the point of his nose. “I accept.”

* * *

Sentio's face reminded him of a clenched fist. "Why?" he demanded. "For crying out loud, Basso."

"To annoy my sister," Basso said.

"I don't understand."

"I know. But you asked why, and I told you."

Sentio dropped into a chair and breathed out, until Basso was sure there couldn't be any air left in his body. "You know what they'll say," he said. "They'll say you only forced through the Enfranchisement Act so you could marry your mistress."

"To a certain extent, that's true," Basso said. "Though she's not my mistress."

Cinio stared at him. Sentio made a soft, sad noise. "Now he tells us."

"It wasn't any of your business," Basso said. "And there were other reasons."

Cinio stood up, like a man about to walk to the gallows. "We're finished," he said. "Oh well, it was interesting while it lasted, I suppose."

Cinio was wrong. The announcement of the First Citizen's betrothal—to a commoner, an immigrant, one of the new citizens created by the Act—stunned the entire City. The first reaction was that, this time, he'd gone too far, but fairly soon the consensus started to break down. The ordinary voters decided they rather liked the idea of a First Citizen marrying a nobody, instead of some bland aristocrat. The only reason, they decided, was that he'd married for love, which was nice; interesting, too, that Basso of all people should turn out to be human after all. They didn't seem to mind the idea that he'd increased the citizen roll by a third just so he could marry the woman he loved; after all, it made sense of a drastic change that most of them couldn't really understand the need for. Bloody good luck to him, they said, and decided they'd probably vote for him next time, if only to stick up a finger at the great lords who were making so much fuss. The newly enfranchised foreigners would, of course, never vote for anyone else; but the fact that the First Citizen was marrying one of their own kind made their support for him almost embarrassingly fanatical. As for the great lords, the news went down surprisingly well with the hard-core Optimates. It displayed arrogance, they thought, a total lack of interest in what anybody thought about him; that was a characteristic they couldn't help but admire. Furthermore, if Basso was dead set on getting married again, it was

probably the sensible thing to do. A marriage alliance with any of the suitable families would have thrown the delicate balance of Vesani politics into chaos. Arrogant and considerate too. Maybe they'd misjudged the man.

So intense was the interest in Basso's engagement that the minor scandal surrounding his nephew's expulsion from the Studium passed almost unnoticed.

The door in the high, bleak wall opened, and a small procession came out: five monks, four of them heavily laden with trunks and boxes, one with a bundle of books in his arms, and Bassano, muffled up in a huge brown robe against the cold, looking very young. He saw the carriage and grinned.

Basso opened the door. "Get in," he said.

The monks loaded the luggage onto the roof. Bassano sat down and reached out two red hands towards the glass of brandy Basso had just poured.

"Not yet," Basso said, moving the glass out of reach. "Bassano, what the hell...?"

"Please," Bassano said. "I'm frozen."

Basso relented, and Bassano swallowed the brandy like a dog fed at table. Basso poured him another.

"It wasn't my fault," Bassano said. "Well, it was, but not—"

"From the beginning."

The coach moved off, flanked by ten dragoons in full armour; an extraordinary sight in the Studium close, but there didn't seem to be anybody around to see it. "You broke the Patriarch's arm," Basso said. "This should be interesting."

Bassano nodded. He was shivering slightly; he'd always felt the cold. "It was my fault," he said. "I shouldn't have let him get to me. But it all seemed so unlikely, if you see what I mean."

"From the beginning."

"Well." Bassano wriggled himself into the corner of the seat and pulled the rug over his knees. He was definitely thinner, and his hair had grown. "I was sitting in my cell—technical term for your living quarters—reading Dalissenus on the immutability of the soul, when two monks came and hammered on my door."

“Hammered?”

“There’s monks and monks,” Bassano said. “These monks were from the porter’s lodge. I knew them; they usually do security. Beating up poor people who sneak in looking for food and throwing them out. Not your usual messengers.”

“When was this?”

“Late,” Bassano replied. “After midnight prayers. Most people are asleep by then, but I don’t need that much sleep, and it’s a nice, quiet time to catch up on your assignments.”

“Go on.”

“Well,” Bassano said, “they took me to the Patriarch’s office. Never been there before, but I knew where I was going; there isn’t anything else down that end. I asked the monks what was going on, but they just said, ‘You’ll see,’ which didn’t sound promising.”

“And?”

“Basically,” Bassano said, “he’d called me in so he could have a go at me. I have no idea why. He started off by saying I was the most useless student they’d ever had there, which is simply untrue; I’ve been doing really rather well, and all the tutors seemed very pleased. I couldn’t make head nor tail of that, so I just stood there looking blank. Then he told me I was idle and arrogant and various other things, some of them perfectly true; then he accused me of making advances to the novices, which wasn’t true at all; then he started going on about my father.”

“I see. Saying what?”

“This and that,” Bassano replied. “Mostly, how he deserved everything he got.” Bassano shrugged. “I just stood there thinking, this is really strange. It didn’t bother me.”

“And?”

“Then he started talking about you.”

“Really,” Basso said quietly. “What did he—?”

“Lots,” Bassano said. “How you were a disgrace to your family and your class, how you’d betrayed the purity of our race for a few easy votes; political stuff.”

“Did you say anything?”

Bassano shrugged. “ ‘I’m sorry you think that way,’ or words to that effect. I was embarrassed more than anything else.”

“Then what?”

Bassano pulled the rug across his chest. “Then he told me you were getting married. It was the first I’d heard of it. I assumed he was lying.”

“Actually—”

Bassano nodded. “I asked, afterwards. And I remembered, my mother’s clever idea and all that. Uncle—”

“He told you about the betrothal. And?”

“I said I didn’t believe him, and he got quite worked up. Started shouting, instead of drawling. I’m afraid I shouted back.”

“And?”

“And then I hit him,” Bassano said. “With a candlestick. It seemed to be the only way to make him shut up.”

Basso sighed. “You couldn’t have just left the room.”

“I know,” Bassano said. “Violence is an admission of failure. It didn’t occur to me to walk out. I think I thought I couldn’t, because it wasn’t allowed.”

“Your logic—”

“I wasn’t thinking straight,” Bassano said. “He said it was really just as well you were marrying your foreign whore—he didn’t say foreign, he used a different word—because when you went crazy and cut her throat, it’d be no great loss.”

“So you broke his arm.”

“I was aiming for his head,” Bassano said. “But he moved.”

Basso clicked his tongue. “Anticipate your opponent’s reactions,” he said, “it’s the first rule of hand-to-hand combat.” He paused, then said, “Your mother—”

“Won’t be happy, no.”

“She’ll blame me.”

Bassano frowned. “How? It was nothing to do with—”

“Don’t be stupid,” Basso said. “A senior cleric doesn’t just take it into his head to pick a fight with a student. Volusiano is an Optimate, his brother’s the shadow chancellor. Obviously this was about me. Your mother will blame me, and she’ll be quite right.”

“Oh.” Bassano looked down at his hands. “I’m sorry.”

“So you should be.” Basso poured him another brandy. “There’s a jar on the floor. Honey-cakes.”

“But why?” Bassano said. “Why would getting me thrown out of the Studium affect you?”

Basso gave him a mildly contemptuous look. “Although,” he said, “it’s an odd way of going about things. A bit limp-wristed, if you follow me.”

“Sorry?”

“First, an assassination attempt. Then, when that fails, they have my nephew thrown out of college. It’s hardly an escalation of terror.”

“You think it was—”

“Yes,” Basso said. “But that’s beside the point.” He paused, and thought for a moment. “I’m guessing,” he said, “that they’re trying to get at me through your mother. Her deal with me about Olybrias must be common knowledge in the Optimate inner circle. Presumably, they want to get your mother really mad at me, so she’ll forget about our deal and marry Olybrias to punish me. That’d account for the timing,” he went on. “They’ll have heard that I’m keeping my side of the bargain, so they decided to push her hand.”

Bassano looked at him. “Do people really do things like that?”

“Politicians do,” Basso replied. “I tend not to, but only because I’ve never been on the losing side and therefore desperate.” He shook his head. “On balance, I’d rather they’d had another go at killing me. Still, I imagine they took that into account.”

“I’m sorry,” Bassano said.

“Not your fault,” Basso replied crisply. “Though smacking the Patriarch of the Studium around with a candlestick wasn’t perhaps the brightest act on record. Still, I’m hardly in a position to lecture anybody about losing one’s temper. Did you know they tried to press charges?”

Bassano looked scared. “Tried to?”

“Oh yes.” Basso nodded. “The first I heard of all this was General Aelius banging on the door in the early hours of the morning. Pure luck. Because the Studium’s privileged ground, the Guard can’t execute an arrest warrant there unless it’s signed by the military prefect. The prefect had the wit to see there was something funny going on, and went to Aelius, as Commander-in-Chief. Aelius told me, bless him, and I was able to put a stop to it then and there. You’ve been granted a prerogative pardon, by the way; first time in eighty years, but luckily Sentio found the precedent in some book. There’ll be fun and games in the House about that, I expect.”

He grinned. "If it hadn't been for Aelius, you'd probably be in jail right now, and we'd have a devil of a job getting you out."

"Jail." It was the first time he'd heard fear in Bassano's voice. Of course, it was the first time he'd had anything to be afraid of. "But that's..."

"You did break his arm," Basso said.

"I didn't mean to."

"I know. You said. Anyway, that's all dealt with." He paused, then said: "Where do you want to go?"

It hadn't occurred to him that he was now homeless. He didn't know what to say.

"Your mother's, presumably," Basso went on. "Though I don't suppose she'll be overjoyed to see you. Getting expelled for violent assault; she has a wonderful turn of phrase when she's angry. With me, of course, but I wouldn't be surprised if she took it out on you. Not the clearest of thinkers, somehow."

Bassano shivered. Basso said, "You can stay with me if you like."

"But Mother..."

"Won't know," Basso replied. "Send her a letter, say you're staying with friends till you find a place."

Bassano hesitated, then nodded. "If that's all right with you," he said.

"Of course. Stay as long as you like. At least," he added quickly, "until the wedding."

The carriage stopped, and Basso quickly leaned forward and twitched the curtain aside. "We're here," he said, and Bassano noticed he'd been suddenly tense, until he saw why they'd stopped moving. He wondered: will that stay with him for the rest of his life? "We've got to wait for the guards to open the door," he said, in a rather self-consciously long-suffering voice. "They have to make sure there's no assassins hiding behind the flowerpots before we're allowed to get out."

"About the wedding," Bassano said.

"Yes. Thought you'd ask. Well, you can meet her for yourself. I'd like to know," he added, in a voice Bassano hadn't heard before, "what you think."

(And Bassano realised, with a shock like twisting your ankle: I could put a stop to it, with just a few words. If I said no, you can't possibly marry this woman, he wouldn't.)

“I’m hardly an authority,” Bassano said.

Basso gave him a scowl. “I’m not asking you to field-test her for me,” he said, “just give me your opinion.”

“I didn’t...”

Basso laughed. “Of course you didn’t,” he said. “I just want to know if you like her, that’s all.”

“What do the twins think?”

“They have no opinion,” Basso said.

“Have they met her?”

“No.”

“Really? Why not?”

Basso shrugged. “They haven’t asked to meet her, I haven’t suggested it. That would imply that all three of us think it’s not really any of our business.”

“Ah,” Bassano said; and then the guard knocked on the door of the carriage, which meant they could leave.

Eight

The First Citizen's decision to increase the purity of the Vesani nomisma had a number of far-reaching effects. The most obvious of these was an influx of foreign money, as Auxentine and Sclerian bankers sent hundreds of tons of gold, in coin and metal scrap, to the Vesani Mint to be exchanged for the new high-standard coins. Basso had stipulated that the differential should be kept low: five per cent to begin with, rising to five and a half when the mint supervisor complained that his staff were being overwhelmed, and the new dies were wearing out faster than the engravers could cut replacements. Even so, the income generated was far in excess of what had been expected. The whole world, it seemed, wanted to buy and sell in Vesani currency, and those who didn't soon found they had no choice. In Auxentia, it was practically impossible to pay anything other than taxes in Auxentine coin; not that that mattered, since at least two-thirds of the country's circulating medium (according to conservative estimates) had already been shipped to the Vesani Mint, melted down and reissued as nomismata, with Basso's head on one side and Victory advancing left on the other. The fact that the Victory in question could only be the recent Vesani —Auxentine war didn't seem to bother anybody. The Sclerian government tried to ban the use of Vesani currency; and when the new law was universally ignored, the King made an example of some Auxentine merchants, which prompted the Auxentines to cut off all trade with Scleria for two months, after which hunger riots in the capital induced the King to relent. By then, however, Vesani banks and trading companies had taken full advantage and concluded long-term deals for a number of desirable

commodities that had hitherto been staples of Sclerian commerce. The King had his finance minister disgraced and thrown in jail, but for some reason that didn't serve to woo the Auxentines back. Meanwhile, the differential income...

"I don't understand," she said. "How does it work, exactly?"

Basso smiled. "Simple," he said. "Suppose you're an Auxentine trader. You need to be able to pay for your stuff in Vesani nomismata, because that's all your trading partners are prepared to accept—"

"Why?"

"Because our coins are guaranteed ninety-eight per cent pure gold. Other people's coins have got all manner of old rubbish in them. So a hundred pounds' weight of nomismata is guaranteed to be ninety-eight pounds' weight of good stuff. A hundredweight of Mavortine staters, on the other hand—no offence intended—means you've got about seventy pounds of gold and thirty pounds of copper, tin, zinc and God knows what else."

"But the Auxentine coins are ninety-six per cent."

"I know," Basso said. "Really, there's no sense to it, but that's what happens in business. You insist on the best coin available, which now means nomismata." He stopped and flicked the dead head off a flower. "Anyway, the Auxentines and everybody else have been bringing their domestic coins to us; we melt them down, take out the rubbish and mint nomismata, which we give back to them."

"Less five and a half per cent."

Basso nodded. "For our trouble. It's done on the pure gold content, of course. You're an Auxentine; you bring me a hundred tons of your coins, from which I get ninety-six tons of pure gold. I rake off five and a half per cent—just over five and a quarter tons, which I keep. Then I add two tons of copper to the pure stuff, mint it into coins and give it back. My profit is therefore just under six tons, because I'm not paying you back in pure gold, I'm giving you ninety-eight per cent pure."

"I see," she said, and he thought: yes, she does. He was impressed. "That's a good deal."

"Particularly," Basso added, "since the bankers organising the exchange—it's all got to be done through banks, of course—take one per cent

commission on top of what the government takes.”

“That’s you.”

He smiled. “That’s me. May not sound much, one per cent, but it’s a lot. Eight hundred thousand nomismata so far. It’ll pay for the new shipyard.”

She frowned. “With which...”

“With which I’ll build a new fleet for the Navy, cheaper than the government yards could do it but still quite profitably.”

“With which?”

“With which,” Basso said, “when the time comes, we’ll drive the Auxentines out of the White Sea altogether and get a monopoly of the main grain routes to the East.”

“Using ships paid for with their money.”

“Essentially, yes.” He grinned. “The differential income will pay for the ships, so yes, we’re getting our new empire for free. Once we’ve got the monopoly, of course, every Auxentine ship carrying grain from the Auxentine farming colonies to the homeland will have to pay us half a nomisma on the ton, or risk ending up at the bottom of the sea. In due course, when the price of grain in Auxentia gets so high that people can’t afford to pay, we’ll offer them membership of the Vesani Commonwealth. It’s all right,” he added, “you don’t know about that, because it doesn’t exist yet. That’s about ten stages down the line.”

“An empire.”

“An empire, and no stupid great wars of conquest,” Basso said. “Better still, an empire that doesn’t *feel* like an empire, so nobody will mind. All they’ll see will be the valuable benefits: free trade inside the Commonwealth, Vesani currency, weights and measures, Vesani law, Commonwealth citizenship, a single Commonwealth army—which won’t have anybody to fight, of course, so it won’t cost a fortune and thousands of young men won’t die. All that for a slight increase in taxes, probably offset by lower prices in the marketplace. And all that,” he added, “because, on a whim, I wanted to annoy the Optimates.”

She looked at him, then turned away and watched the fountain in the middle of the courtyard. “You don’t feel apprehensive,” she said, “changing the world to suit yourself.”

“No.” He took her hand and led her to the stone bench. “The secret is, always to give something back.” He sat down; she sat beside him. “A

hundred of my predecessors tried to make the world a better place,” he said. “They tried so hard, we’ve had poverty, economic collapse, and so many wars I lose count. My approach is, I try and make money for myself in a way that benefits the Republic. It’s not exactly difficult. If it was, I don’t suppose I’d be able to do it.”

“Really.”

“Quite true. That sort of thing’s always come easily to me. Like the Reserve, for example. Did I tell you about that?”

(Maybe I love her, he thought, because at last I’ve found someone I can brag to.)

“What’s the Reserve?”

“My big idea,” Basso said proudly. “The government pays a living wage, not a fortune but enough to support a man and his family, to any man between the ages of eighteen and sixty who’s fit and strong enough to row a galley in the Fleet. In order to get the money, he doesn’t have to do anything; all he’s committing himself to is serving in the Fleet when we’re at war, plus a few weeks’ training every year. He gets paid extra for training and active service, and the rest of the time, he can do any job he wants to earn more money. Or, if he can’t get a job or if he doesn’t like the way that working for a living tends to cut into your free time, he can get by and his children won’t starve. Result: we have a fully trained standing navy when we need it, but which we don’t have to pay through the nose for, like they do in other countries; and nobody need ever go hungry again, which is something my predecessors have been trying to achieve for a thousand years, with a total lack of success.”

She frowned. “That’s the thing,” she said. “You add on getting rid of starvation and poverty like it’s a fringe benefit. Like the slice of lemon you get with a plate of whitebait.”

He laughed. “That’s why I succeed,” he said, “where the men with beautiful souls always fail. If you walk through the market asking the stallholders to give you a slice of lemon for free, they’d laugh in your face. Pay for the whitebait and you get a good meal of whitebait for your money, plus the free lemon. It’s like the jury pay scheme.”

She smiled. “You want to tell me about the jury pay scheme.”

“Yes.”

“Please,” she said. “Tell me.”

He laughed. "You don't want to—"

"Yes I do."

"All right." He realised his arm was round her shoulders. It had sort of grown there, like ivy climbing a wall. "Men over sixty, or those who can't work because of sickness or injury, can volunteer for jury service, for which they get paid a living wage. It covers the people who aren't looked after by the Reserve, and it means that anybody I want found guilty will be found guilty, and anybody I want let off will get let off. Which means," he added pleasantly, "that my enemies won't stand a chance."

She frowned. "That sounds expensive."

"It will be," he replied. "Like the Reserve. But the figures work out fine. Partly it depends on keeping the price of food as low as possible—which we'll be able to do, when we've got the grain monopoly. Also, since we import all our food, it helps a lot that the nomisma's so strong against other currencies; we get far more for one nomisma than we used to before we put in that extra two per cent. Also, we'll help pay for it with a tax on business profits."

She laughed. "Go on, then. Explain to me how paying more tax will make you richer."

"Easy." He smiled. "I can afford to pay more tax. My rivals can't. I stay in business, they don't. I buy them out cheap and take over their banks and companies. My additional profits more than cancel out my higher tax bill. I proved that that works with the land bubble, directly after the plague. And," he went on, "the more money I make, the more I can afford to give ostentatiously away, thereby making the people love me; which means I get re-elected, and I can do what I like."

"Basso," she said solemnly, "you're a monster."

"Yes." He nodded. "I'm corrupt and ruthless and I change the world for my own personal gain. Which is why it's so good to be on my side." He took his arm off her shoulders and leaned forward. "In our history," he said, "there have been a number of genuine reformers, men who really wanted to make life better for their fellow men. All but two of them were bashed to death by the mob. The other two killed themselves in prison, because they didn't fancy being tortured to death. That's just stupid. I, on the other hand, *will* make life better for my fellow men. The difference is, I've got a very

strong motive for succeeding. Also,” he added, “I’m not stupid. Not bright, perhaps, but definitely not stupid.”

She smiled at him. “If you say so,” she said.

The priest Chrysophilus had his own special chair now. He’d happened to say how comfortable it was on one of his early visits; now it was kept specifically for him, and only brought out when he came to call.

“Let’s sit in the garden,” Basso said. “We might as well enjoy the warm weather while we can.”

The chair followed them, carried with great solemnity by two footmen, like the Throne of the Sun at the start of Ascension Week. A third footman followed with the brandy.

“It’s very kind of you,” Chrysophilus said. “And you may not like me very much after I’ve delivered my message.”

“Heralds are sacrosanct, even in war,” Basso replied. “Here’ll do. This time of day, the breeze wafts over the scent of lavender from the big commercial herb garden across the valley.” They set down the chair, making sure it was level on the gravel. “At other times of day, we get the breeze from the tannery. Not nearly as pleasant.”

Such an easy man to read. He was thinking: civilisation, the way things ought to be. The way they aren’t, back at the Studium. Basso made a mental note, and said, “The message.”

“Yes.” Chrysophilus hesitated, unwilling to risk saying the words that would spoil all this. Heralds-are-sacrosanct meant that he had the First Citizen’s word that he’d be allowed to leave with his head still on his shoulders, but fine old brandy with the scent of lavender in the rose garden would be over for the day, and possibly for ever. No wonder the poor man seemed reluctant to speak.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Basso said. “I’m forgetting my manners. Join me for dinner?”

The look on the priest’s face was enough to break anyone’s heart. “That’s very kind—”

“Splendid,” Basso said, “I’ll tell them you’re staying. I gather it’s duck from the lagoon, with a sort of cream and pepper sauce.” He clapped his

hands and a footman materialised next to him. "This gentleman's staying to dinner," he said. "Tell the cook. Now, then," he went on. "The message."

Chrysophilus took a deep breath, like a man about to dive. "Your sister isn't happy about your betrothal."

"No," Basso said, "I don't suppose she is."

"She sees it as an affront to the family name and her father's memory."

"Quite." Basso nodded. "And so it is, in a way. It certainly goes against everything my father stood for. Then again, so do I." He grinned. "I loved my father, and in a way I respected him, but he was an idiot. For one thing, he married my mother. No choice in the matter, either of them. But they weren't suited to each other. It wasn't a disaster—anything but—but it diminished both of them. She was an intelligent woman married to a fool: a fool who was quite happy being a fool, he never saw anything wrong with it; I don't suppose he ever wanted to be the slightest bit different from how he was. And he was married to a woman who didn't care, let him get on with it; she never challenged his unshakable belief in himself, mostly because she wasn't all that interested in him. They lived together for a very long time, and neither did the other the slightest bit of good." He paused; Chrysophilus was wearing a dazed look. "I'm only telling you all this to give you an idea of the sort of criteria my sister's working from. Did she say what she proposes to do about it?"

Blank look. "I'm sorry?"

"Threats," Basso said. "If I marry Melsuntha, will she immediately marry Olybrias? Or has she dreamed up some alternative form of sanction?"

He shook his head. "She didn't say anything about sanctions," he replied. "Just that she'd be bitterly offended and she'd never forgive you."

"Which is more or less where we stand at the moment," Basso replied briskly, "so, no threats. But what do you think?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"About my marriage. What do you think about it?"

Startled look; as if he was riding very fast in a racing chariot, and the driver had just handed him the reins. "It's not for me to..."

"You must have an opinion."

"Not really." Pause; then, "Well, actually, yes, I do. I think it's rather good, actually."

"Thank you," Basso said gravely. "Why?"

A man pinned down and surrounded by a simple question. “Well,” he said, “you’ve got nothing to gain from it, politically or socially or in business terms, so I’m assuming...”

“I’m marrying for love. Yes. And?”

“And I think that’s rather fine,” Chrysophilus said feebly. “It’s not the sort of thing people do. But maybe they should.”

Basso thought for a moment. “I disagree with you there,” he said. “For most people, love is a bloody stupid reason for getting married. It’s like buying a house because you like the pretty flowers in the garden. But in my case, I’m a middle-aged man who’s performed all his family and dynastic obligations; I’ve achieved all my ambitions, so I don’t need to marry for money or influence. And Melsuntha will be good for me. She answers me back. She doesn’t agree with me.” He smiled. “She’s the only person I know who doesn’t agree with me. Do you see what I mean?”

Chrysophilus nodded. “I think so, yes.”

“Marvellous,” Basso growled. “Even you agree with me, and technically, you’re the enemy. Maybe you can understand why I put such a high premium on a little dissent.” He drank his brandy and stood up. “Tell my sister I’m sorry she feels that way, but I have no intention of changing my mind to suit her or anybody else. That’s it.” Then, seeing the sad look on Chrysophilus’ face, he added, “It’s all right, you’re still invited to dinner. Come into the house, and you can tell me about this strange business with my nephew.”

As he’d expected, Chrysophilus couldn’t tell him anything he didn’t already know. That evening, after the priest had gone, he received a letter he’d been waiting for and wrote four letters of his own. Then he rang for a clerk.

“Deliver these,” he said, “quick as you like. Then, in the morning, go round to the Studium and ask Father Chrysophilus, the priest who was here tonight, if he’d mind dropping in tomorrow afternoon. That’s all.”

Bank business all morning, followed by a Treasury committee meeting to approve the draft of the new finance bill. Three letters he’d been expecting were waiting for him when he came out of the meeting; he had to wait for the fourth and fifth until he got home. He read all five carefully several times, wrote one reply, and told the servants to get out Father Chrysophilus’ chair.

“In my study,” he added. “Show the Father up there as soon as he arrives, and no interruptions. And get a bottle of the good brandy, the Auxentine stuff in the green bottles. We’ll probably be celebrating.”

He went to his bedroom and changed into a comfortable gown, an old favourite with full sleeves and pockets, then climbed the stairs to the study, where the special chair and the brandy were waiting. Since he still had a little time in hand, he sent for Bassano.

“Won’t keep you,” he said. “But you might like to send out for your stuff, everything you’ve got in store. You’ll be moving in here permanently. Assuming,” he added, as Bassano stared at him, “that you’d like to.”

“Mother...”

Basso smiled. “The hell with her,” he said. “You in for dinner, or going out somewhere?”

“No plans,” Bassano replied.

“Have dinner with us, then,” he said. “There’s a halfwit who thinks he can get me to change my mind about a bad loan by sending me jugged hare in cider vinegar. He’s wasting his time, but that’s no reason we shouldn’t eat it.”

Bassano’s favourite. “In that case,” he said.

“Splendid. Get someone to tell the cook.”

Then an hour alone with some routine paperwork, to clear his head and calm him down. He started to write a letter, but his hand was shaking, so he left it for the morning. Instead, he leaned back in his chair and spent ten minutes gazing into the eyes of the gold and mosaic Queen of Heaven, seven feet tall and infinitely wise, who stood over him always. She was only bits of stone, paint, and gold foil beaten ridiculously thin, and for much of his lifetime she’d presided over a room stuffed full of redundant furniture; if he could pick her off the walls without destroying her completely, she’d be worth the price of a small ship. Probably just as well, he decided, that his father had never realised that.

As the daughter and sister of two First Citizens, the lady Fausta Tranquillina Carausia was entitled to display on her carriage doors the double-headed lion of the Republic, in gold leaf, on a red background. The carriage itself was third-hand, elderly and badly in need of new rear springs;

you could hear it coming from way off. She'd taken quotes from six painters and chosen the cheapest. Her lion, everybody said, looked more like an overfed spaniel, and the gold leaf had been so sparingly applied that big red blotches showed through its ribs, making it look as though it had just been gored by a bull. There was also, people said, the small matter of good taste; since it was no secret that she hated her brother to death, taking advantage of even so minor a privilege was questionable behaviour at best. If the lady Tranquillina was bothered by that, she gave no sign of it, and pretended not to understand why small boys made dying-dog noises when her carriage passed them in the street.

Her various eccentricities weren't a problem as far as the Patriarch and governors of the Studium were concerned. A benefactress as generous as the lady Tranquillina was allowed a certain latitude. The older members of Chapter vividly remembered some of the great characters of the past: the lady Domitilla Secunda, for example, who stopped bathing or combing her hair when she was twenty-seven and lived to be ninety, or the lady Plautilla Sebastina Carausia, who insisted on walking the circuit of the City walls every morning, accompanied by the Studium choir and wearing nothing but a sack. Rich, dotty women's money had made the Studium the most respected institute of theological scholarship in the world. So long as they paid cash and didn't actually draw blood, they could do pretty much what they liked.

In any case, Tranquillina's demands were far more modest. She required a private chapel in the temple, the services of a priest as her personal chaplain, prayers for her dead husband three times a day in perpetuity and, in due course, a granite tomb in the temple portico, the design for which was already on file: a skeleton carved in red granite, wearing a wedding dress and holding an effigy of her late husband in the regalia of the Invincible Sun, and on the base of the plinth, the following simple inscription;

Fausta Tranquillina Carausia
Murdered by her brother
Bassianus Arcadius Severus

She was at prayer in her chapel when Chrysophilus tracked her down. It wasn't her regular time for prayer; that was usually six till nine in the morning, then nine till midnight. Sometimes, though, when her soul was unusually troubled, she came to the chapel at noon and stayed for an hour or so.

He cleared his throat, but she didn't seem to notice. Lately, she'd taken to pretending to be deaf in one ear, just like her brother, though Chrysophilus knew for a fact she had ears like a bat. Some days she wrapped a napkin stained with beetroot juice round her left hand, but not today.

"My Lady," he said softly.

She sighed and lifted her head. "What is it?"

Well, he thought, here goes. "I have a message for you, from your brother."

He had her attention. "What does *he* want?"

She was still staring up at the iconostasis, so couldn't see him close his eyes. "Perhaps you might prefer to hear it in the ante-room," he said.

"No. Tell me what he wants."

Quickly he looked round for possible improvised weapons. Unfortunately, the chapel was full of them. The labarum would make a fairly useful club, and you could smash a man's skull like an eggshell with the solid gold globus arciger. He took a long step back and raised his voice slightly. "It's about Senator Olybrias," he said.

It had been a smooth, efficient piece of work. Olybrias, otherwise as sound a businessman as any in the Republic, had a little-known weakness for mineral rights, gold in particular. Why go to all the trouble of earning money, he'd been known to remark to close friends, when you can dig it out of the ground or sift it out of the silt in a river bed? Accordingly, when two of his oldest and closest business associates approached him with news of a remarkable new gold strike in Fermia, he was only too pleased to hear them out. It was, they told him, a single rich, thick vein, exposed by the collapse of a section of cliff that had been slowly undermined by a river. Under Fermian law, all minerals belonged to the Duke—a chronically extravagant man who spent twice his revenues each year on a futile war with his

northern neighbours. Since the Duke was even more desperate for ready cash than usual, he was prepared to sell the entire strike, including any further deposits in the same valley not yet detected, for six million Vesani nomismata.

Olybrias objected that he didn't have six million; or at least, not that he could lay his hands on without mortgaging everything he owned. That was a great shame, his friends replied, because it was only a matter of time before Basso found out about it, and Basso could afford to pay six million out of his pocket change.

So Olybrias went to the Bank of the Divine Intercession, the only major bank in the Republic in which Basso had no stake whatsoever. He was obliged to put up the deeds to all his real estate as security for four million, and write a note of hand against his shares, debentures and trading stock for the other two; a discount of three million in total, but he didn't really have a choice. Within forty-eight hours of his friends' initial visit, a courier brought him a transfer deed, signed by the Duke of Fermia and sealed by the Fermian High Council. By coincidence, it was the same day that Basso announced his engagement to that foreign woman.

Olybrias' surveyors reported back a week later. There was gold in the vein, sure enough. Unfortunately, somebody had put it there; about two hundred nomismata's worth, stuffed into holes drilled into the clay. There was no chance whatsoever of finding anything else there. It was the wrong sort of rock. If you were very lucky, and you dug up the whole mountain, you might find a little iron, with an outside chance of a few handfuls of copper. Gold, however, was out of the question.

An hour after the surveyors had left, Olybrias got a letter from Basso. So sorry to hear about the scandalous fraud he'd suffered at the hands of the Duke. It had come as a great surprise (Basso said) since the Duke was a friend of his, and he'd never have believed him capable of it. Naturally, Basso would bring all possible pressure to bear on his errant friend to make restitution, but he didn't hold out much hope; he happened to know that the entire six million had been used to pay off a long-overdue loan, to a bank right here in the City, so the Duke couldn't pay back what he no longer had. Accordingly, Basso had taken the liberty of buying Olybrias' debt from the Divine Intercession (at a premium, naturally); he felt bad about the fact that his friend had shamelessly deceived a distinguished Vesani businessman,

and felt it was his duty to put things right. As a result, Basso said, he now had in front of him on his desk the deeds to all Olybrias' real property, together with his note of hand. It went without saying that there was no hurry at all about paying back the loan; in fact, as far as he was concerned, it could remain outstanding indefinitely. The only favour he'd like to ask was that Olybrias should forget all about marrying the lady Tranquillina. It was harsh of him, he knew, but he couldn't allow his sister to marry a man who was staring ruin in the face, and therefore couldn't guarantee that he'd be in a position to maintain her in the manner to which she'd become accustomed. Devoted as he was to his sister, he was aware that she had her faults, and extravagance was one of them—her excessively generous gifts to religious houses, for one thing. The plain fact was, as things stood, Olybrias simply couldn't afford to marry Lina, and that was all there was to it. Undoubtedly, Olybrias could see the sense in that; however, for Basso's peace of mind, would Olybrias be kind enough to sign and return the enclosed declaration and undertaking, which would of course constitute a legally binding contract?

She looked at him, but not the way anybody would look at another human being. Then she said, "Thank you. That's all."

He stood up, took two paces towards the door, then stopped. She was, after all, a fellow believer in great pain, and he was supposed to be a priest.

"If there's anything..." he said.

"Get out."

From where he was standing to the door, ten paces. He managed nine of them, but then she said, "Wait." Very reluctantly, he turned to face her.

"Come back in an hour," she said. "I'll need you to take a letter."

He read it a third time, but nothing had changed, so he folded it carefully and put it away in the rosewood box, along with the other four letters she'd written him since he'd killed her husband. Turning the key in the box's lock made him feel a little safer. He put the key away carefully and left the room.

It wasn't often that Basso needed company, but when the occasion arose, the need was usually desperate. But Bassano was out of the question; Melsuntha wouldn't understand, though she'd try very hard; Antigonus was

probably asleep by now, on the other side of the City on a cold, wet night. It was a pity Chrysophilus hadn't wanted to stay.

Usually he'd have worked through it, drowning himself in paperwork until he couldn't hear her voice in his head any more, but he knew he wouldn't be able to concentrate. Ridiculous, he thought; I've just won a glorious victory over my enemies, as a result of which I can talk to my nephew and marry the woman I love; should be happy, should be celebrating, should be standing in the big window overlooking the square throwing handfuls of gold coins to the cheering crowds.

He considered drinking himself unconscious, but decided against it. Lately, he'd lost any enthusiasm for alcohol; stupid enough already without making himself even more stupid. *I feel nothing for you except contempt*, she'd written, and she'd always been one to choose her words carefully. If that's what she said, that's what she meant. Not anger, not even hate, just contempt. Fine. Another victory like that and he'd have to give serious consideration to hanging himself.

Melsuntha found him sitting on the top step of the middle flight of stairs. "I've been looking for you everywhere," she said.

"I'm not here," he replied.

She frowned at him. "What does that mean?"

"It's an attempt to say go away without giving offence," he said. "I don't know, maybe it needs a bit more work."

She sat down beside him, and he thought: actually, this is the first time I haven't been pleased to see her. "I met that priest earlier. He said he'd brought you a letter."

He looked away. "I've been thinking," he said. "About Bassano. He's not going to be a priest after all, but he's got to do something. I won't have him in the Bank. What does that leave?"

"You mean a career?" She shrugged. "Does he need one?"

"I think so," Basso replied. "At least, he thinks so. He seems to feel that if he doesn't do something, he'll just drift amiably through life without any purpose at all."

"So?"

Basso nodded. "That's what he was born for, certainly. The hell with that, though. You were born to sweep out a wattle-and-daub hut, milk goats and die in childbirth. As far as I'm concerned, destiny is the enemy."

She shrugged. "Not the clergy, then. What does that leave?"

"You're the protocol expert, you tell me."

"Let's see." She counted on her fingers. "Scholarship and literature. He could be a philosopher."

Basso laughed. "He'd never finish anything. Besides, that's not a career, that's a hobby."

"Very well. Politics."

"Wouldn't last five minutes."

"I'm inclined to agree with you," she said. "I know you don't want him to join the Bank, but what about some other branch of business? You could set him up as a merchant, or in manufacturing."

Basso shook his head. "He'd be wretched," he said. "Ships and horses and lice in the bed. And I really don't see Bassano running a shipyard or a foundry, do you?"

"I like him," she said. "He's one of the few clever men I've met who hasn't let his intelligence spoil him."

Basso thought about that for a while. "Also," he said, "if I pack him off to Auxentia to buy carpets, I'll never see him. That'd be missing the point. It's got to be something he can do here. Otherwise, he could go and be a provincial governor."

She smiled. As yet, the Vesani Republic had no provinces to govern, but that could be changed. "If you were him," she said, "what would you want to do?"

"Join the Bank," Basso replied. "Because I'd want to take after my uncle Basso. Which is why he can't do that."

She sighed. "It really is a shame about the priesthood," she said. "It would have suited him very well. I don't suppose—"

"He tried to bash the Patriarch's head in with a candlestick," Basso said. "I've thought about getting a new Patriarch, but that'd be a step too far. The University's out, too. It's under the direct supervision of the Studium. I considered founding a new one, but..." He grinned. "Do you think the Invincible Sun had this much trouble, when he was deciding what to do with the human race?"

She raised her eyebrows. "I don't believe in the Invincible Sun," she said.

"I don't suppose you do." He leaned forward a little, his wrists lying on his knees. "What do they believe in where you come from?"

"We believe that the world was created by the Skyfather out of the ribcage of a bear," she replied. "In the twelve hundred years of our recorded history, it doesn't seem to have occurred to anybody to ask why. I have no religious beliefs."

"There's the law," Basso said doubtfully. "He could be a judge."

She considered that. "He has a mind well suited to subtle and abstruse argument," she said. "It's possible that he might enjoy the fine points of legal interpretation, as a mental exercise."

"You're right," Basso said, "it's a stupid idea. Besides, too political. I don't want there to be any danger of them hurting him just to get at me."

"I'll think about it some more," she said, standing up. "Would you like to play a game of chess, or would you rather stay here?"

He won five games, drew one and lost two deliberately, which made her quietly and furiously angry for a while. For some reason, that cheered him up.

"Am I right in thinking," he asked her, "that where you come from, sex before marriage is a deadly sin?"

She looked at him. "Yes."

"But you don't think that."

"Actually, yes I do."

He nodded. "Tell you what," he said. "We'll play one more game. If I win—"

"That's not fair," she said. "You're a better player than me."

"I'll give you a knight handicap."

She thought for a moment. "A knight and a rook."

He considered that. "All right."

"And a stalemate counts as a win for me."

"No." He shook his head. "Stalemate, we play again."

"Very well." She was fiddling with the beads of her necklace: an ugly, barbaric-looking thing, which he assumed was from the old country. "But I get first move."

She was a very good chess player indeed when she really applied her mind to it. At the end, there were only seven pieces on the board. They'd been playing for well over an hour. He saw the winning move quite

suddenly, as though he'd just walked into the room and looked over the players' shoulders. He could've sworn it hadn't been there a moment ago, or surely he'd have noticed it; or maybe it was just a slightly different way of looking at the world, a minuscule shift in perspective.

She'd been building a trap for him for some time, a relatively clumsy one, which he knew he could avoid. He picked up his king, the piece that would set up his victory, and let its weight hang on his fingertips. It was the best game she'd ever given him, and he could see she was confident of forcing a draw, with some hope of winning. He thought: I am Basso the Merciless, who always gets what he wants. What do I want? I want to lose this game.

He put the king back and moved his one remaining pawn instead. She winced; he'd wrecked her trap, which she'd worked so hard to build.

"It's a draw," he said. "Neither of us can win from here."

"You think so."

He shrugged. "We can play it out if you like."

She moved her rook; empty gesture of aggression. He defended his pawn. "I agree," she said, "it's a draw. That means we play again."

The next game was possibly the best he'd ever played. He lost it without letting her see he was trying to lose, which took so much more skill than just winning. She was delighted; not, he was fairly sure, by the reprieve of her virtue, but because she'd beaten him at chess. It was a lie, of course, and properly speaking there's no place for lies in a good marriage. He understood why she got so angry when he cheated to let her win.

"Best of three?" he said.

She grinned at him. "Certainly not," she said. "I don't believe in pushing my luck."

"That wasn't luck, it was skill."

"If you say so." She started putting the pieces back where they belonged. "My people would say that Skyfather guided my hand, to keep me from sin."

"I hope not," he replied. "That'd be cheating."

She frowned. "I don't know," she said. "As I understand it, if Skyfather helps you with something, you're still entitled to take all the credit. It's certainly that way with battles, so presumably it holds true with chess as well."

He put back the last two black pieces. "You don't believe in your gods, but you believe in sin," he said. "That's a contradiction."

"Yes." She smiled at him. "You seem very interested in my people," she said. "I'm surprised at that. I'd have thought you'd consider us to be mere savages."

"I like savages," he said. "In moderation, of course. Enough to marry one, at any rate."

"Ah." She pulled a stern face. "But I'm not a savage any more. I'm civilised."

He nodded. "Just as well one of us is, I suppose."

"All Vesani are civilised," she said. "The definition of civilisation is being like the Vesani. It would never occur to you to take seriously the idea of a universe adapted from the ribcage of a bear."

"True," Basso said. "We'd ask where the bear came from in the first place."

"Indeed. Where do you think the universe came from?"

"I neither know nor care." He stood up. "I'm feeling much better now. I think I'll go and do some work."

She nodded. "It would help," she said. "Shall I tell them to send you up some tea?"

"Yes, thanks." He paused to look at her. "My sister's a hell of a chess player," he said.

"As good as you?"

"No," he replied. "But she really hates to lose. Her idea of a deeply satisfying game is a bitterly contested draw. Bassano, on the other hand, either wins in the first twelve moves or loses interest and makes stupid mistakes."

"I've been thinking," she said.

He walked back to his chair and sat down. "Well?"

"A job for him. Not a career," she added. "Start him off with a job, and see how he takes to it. That will help you decide what he's best suited to."

Basso raised an eyebrow. "I think I follow," he said. "What did you have in mind?"

She folded her hands in her lap. "You told Sentio you had reason to believe that the governor of the Mint is dishonest."

"Yes. And?"

“Dismiss him,” she said. “Appoint Bassano in his place.”

Basso frowned. “I’m not so sure about that,” he said. “It’s a serious job.”

“Give him someone to advise him,” she replied. “It has to be a serious job in order to engage his interest. You should tell him you need him to do it, since there’s nobody else you can trust. In the present circumstances, trustworthiness matters far more than experience or even ability. You can also point out that the job will be temporary, while you choose a suitable permanent replacement.”

“I’m still not sure,” Basso said. “It’d all depend who I put in with him. I can’t spare Antigonus. I suppose we could do without Tragazes for a couple of months, but I don’t know that Bassano would work well with him. Also, he’s looking after the twins.”

She moved her shoulders very slightly; not really a shrug. “I’m sure you can find someone,” she said. “You asked me for a suggestion. I wouldn’t presume to advise you about the details.”

Basso clicked his tongue. “Why is it,” he said sadly, “that when people duck out of the difficult, boring stuff and leave it all for me to do, they call it not presuming?” She laughed. He knew she had no sense of humour, just a very good sense of timing. “That’s all right,” he said, “I’ll think of someone. And yes, it’s a good idea. Thank you.”

She accepted his thanks with a slight nod, like an emperor acknowledging the loyalty of his troops.

“It’s the most extraordinary place,” Bassano said. “The people are all lunatics, and the noise is unbelievable. They’ve put extra-thick curtains on the back of my door so I can hear myself think when I’m actually sitting in my office, but once you go outside into the main shop...”

“But you like it there.”

“God, yes. It’s...” Bassano grinned. “It’s different.”

Overhead, a single beam of light sliced down through the red, blue and purple of the round window, directly above the altar. The idea was that the first light of dawn should fall directly on the huge (to Basso’s way of thinking, rather vulgar) golden statue of the Invincible Sun, striking the mirror in His outstretched left hand and reflecting onto the central panel of

the jewelled triptych on the centre of the altar; at which point, so the theory ran, He was considered to be present in Temple, and the service could begin. It was unfortunate that Basso should have chosen to get married on a cloudy day. The light kept darting around (all over the place, his father would have said, like the mad woman's shit) but so far it had managed to avoid the mirror. That meant Basso and Bassano were trapped over on one side of the chapel, Melsuntha and her lot were hunkered down out of sight on the other side, and nothing could happen.

"I'm glad you've settled in so well," Basso said.

"Me too. And astonished," Bassano added. "After all, it's the first actual job of work I've ever done. I fully expected I'd be useless at it. Mind you, your man Bringas is keeping a very close eye on me, which is just as well. I like him. He's got a very dry sense of humour."

News to me, Basso thought. Maybe he's one of those tiresome people who think you can only show proper respect by being boring. "It hadn't occurred to me that the noise would be a problem," he said.

"In the Mint? Are you kidding? Close on a thousand men with hammers bashing steel dies all day long." Bassano shifted a little; cramp, presumably, from standing still in one place for so long. "There's one particular note," he went on. "Actually, there's about five; but four of them mean a slight misstrike. The fifth one's what you get when a coin's been struck perfectly. It's like a thousand-part orchestra all playing the triangle, very slightly out of time."

The light flashed off the silver shield of Victory, on the other side of the nave. Way off target. "I'm amazed anybody can work there," he said.

"Oh, they're all deaf," Bassano said. "Which means they shout all the time, even when it's quiet. I imagine you'd know all about that."

"Bringas says you're doing a good job," Basso said.

"Well, he would."

"Not to me." Basso smiled. "We went through that when I gave him the assignment. If he says you're doing well, I believe him."

Bassano shrugged. "I was about to say it's no big deal, it's not exactly difficult, but that's not true. It's not difficult like advanced calculus, or differentiating between primary and secondary premises in applied logic. It's just there's so much of it."

"So much of what?"

“Everything.” Bassano grinned. “The moment you’ve dealt with one thing, there’s something else needing to be done immediately. You haven’t got time to think, you just do stuff, all day. That’s what I mean by different.”

“Welcome to the real world,” Basso said.

“I like it. Maybe not for the rest of my life, but—”

“We’re on, I think.” The mirror was flashing, and the priest had come scurrying forward. “You’ve got the ring?”

A private service, in the chapel of the House. Father Chrysophilus, late of the Studium, now chaplain-in-ordinary to the First Citizen (a three-hundred-year-old sinecure Basso had revived specially for him), conducted a brief, slightly nervous ceremony in front of fifteen people, four of them armed guards, who kept looking round for hidden assassins even while they were joining in the hymns. Cinio and Sentio were there for the government, with Senator Olybrias (at Basso’s particular request) representing the loyal Opposition. Antigonus hadn’t been able to make it, so Tragazes represented the Bank. He had a loud singing voice, like a drunk in an alley. The whole thing reminded Basso of a pauper’s funeral, the only difference that he could see being that it wasn’t being conducted at the public expense.

When it was over, he went with Cinio and Sentio straight to a highways oversight committee meeting. Bassano and Melsuntha rode home together in a hired chaise.

“It went well,” she said.

Bassano didn’t comment on that. Instead, he said, “I’m very fond of my uncle.”

“I know.” She gave him a look that wasn’t a smile, but which conveyed approval. “So am I.”

“Good,” Bassano said. “You know all about what happened, with him and my mother.”

“Of course.”

He thought: it won’t change anything. “I’m a bit concerned he’s off his guard where my mother’s concerned. He beat her fair and square over Olybrias, but...”

She shook her head. “He’s well aware of the threat she continues to pose,” she said. “But he loves his sister very much, which rules out any sort

of pre-emptive strike on his part. He will wait for her to attack again, and react as best he can when the time comes.”

“Ah.” It would be some time, Bassano decided, before he got used to her way of talking. “That’s all right, then.”

“How are you getting on at the Mint?” she asked, and he was able to turn on the charm and the wit, which saved him the trouble of thinking. She listened to him for a while, and then they were back at the Severus house. Job done.

“I’d better get back to work,” Bassano said. “You know, every time I say that it sounds strange. Just the thought of me and work together in the same sentence.”

“I have work to do as well,” she said (and of course, she was still his social secretary, or director of protocol, or whatever the title was). “Are you dining with us tonight?”

Bassano nodded. “These days, I’m too tired in the evenings for riotous living.”

“The twins will be here.”

“Splendid,” Bassano said, maybe with a little too much enthusiasm. “Haven’t seen them for ages.”

It wasn’t a particularly enjoyable meal. Clearly the twins had done something wrong and were in disgrace, but whatever it was, nobody was inclined to mention it. They were polite, mostly silent but very quick to answer when asked a direct question. Otherwise, they ventured no opinions. Apart from a polite, rather formal greeting, neither of them spoke to Bassano all evening.

Melsuntha went to bed early. Basso had work to do, and stayed up late.

Nine

On the third day after the Kalends of Histamenon of the plague year, AUC 997, six caravels sailed into the bay. Nobody remembered seeing them, which direction they came from, whether they came singly and held station off the Point until they'd all arrived, or whether they came in convoy. Citizens of the Republic tended not to see caravels in the bay, in the same way they didn't see pigeons roosting on the guttering.

One of the few definite facts about their arrival is that they tied up on Pier 7 at twelve minutes to noon. This was vouched for by the captain of an Auxentine brigantine, who happened to notice the time on the harbour arch clock as he pulled out, vacating a post on Pier 7 where one of the caravels subsequently moored. That they put in relatively late in the day supports the theory that they came separately, not in convoy, and rendezvoused at the Point; the delay, it is argued, suggests that one or more of the caravels was held up and arrived late.

In accordance with standard procedure, two customs officers were waiting on Pier 7 to receive them, inspect their bills of lading, calculate any dues, make the usual cursory search for contraband or items bearing special duty. The furthest caravel on the right put out a gangplank, in the usual way, but before the customs men could board, a number of men from the ship (estimates vary between three and nine) came on shore, produced hand-axes from inside their coats, and killed the customs men without hesitation or saying a word. Remarkably, there were only two eye-witnesses to the actual killing; one of them was sure he'd misinterpreted what he'd seen, and went

about his business. The other took a moment to recover from the shock, then ran to the harbour master's office.

Exactly how many men disembarked from the caravels will probably never be known. The general assumption was that they were loaded to capacity and had come straight from their home port, in which case, each ship could theoretically carry something in the order of ninety men, putting the total number at five hundred and forty. The weight of the evidence—the speed with which they disembarked, the sheer inconvenience of landing so many men on the cramped space of Pier 7—suggests that there were rather fewer, and best estimates put the total at somewhere between three and four hundred. Accounts also differ wildly concerning how the men were armed. Some witnesses claimed to have seen mail shirts, helmets, shields and spears. Most, however, make no mention of armour, and limit their armament to bows, cutlasses, hangers, axes and knives. A few did carry small shields, since two were recovered later.

One thing of which there is no doubt is that they knew precisely where they wanted to go. From the pier, they marched directly towards the harbour master's office, where nine members of the harbour guard were on duty. In their citations, it is stated that they held their ground and fought until they were wiped out. At least one witness says they broke and ran, but were shot down before they'd covered five yards. The harbour master and his staff were inside at the time, and didn't come out until the armed men were long gone.

Inevitably, a crowd had started to gather. All the witnesses to this stage of the attack talked of a sense of complete bewilderment, a certainty that what they appeared to be watching couldn't possibly be happening; instead of running away, therefore, between fifty and eighty people actually approached the harbour master's office, in an attempt to figure out what was going on. The raiding party immediately started shooting arrows into the crowd at random, killing six men and two women and injuring an unascertained number. At this point, most of the crowd fled; others would appear to have been so stunned that they froze and didn't move. The raiders charged, but it would seem they were more concerned with punching a hole through the crowd and getting past than inflicting casualties; two men were killed, and there were a number of injuries, mostly sword-cuts and broken bones.

The raiders had acted with remarkable speed and purpose. One consequence of this was that they entered the City before any of the fugitives, all of whom had run back towards the seafront because of the angle of the raiders' charge. It is more or less certain that they came in through the Portgate, killing the two gatekeepers, and marched straight up Portway. Needless to say a great many people saw them, and the sight of a large body of men marching in column up a main thoroughfare was certainly unfamiliar; even so, it simply didn't occur to anybody that they could be a hostile force. People stared and got out of the way, but nobody thought to alert the authorities; they assumed that whatever was happening was authorised, and someone official knew all about it.

The first resistance the raiders encountered, therefore, was at the gate of City Yard itself. The raiders would appear to have been entirely successful in concealing their weapons in Portway, but a sharp-eyed guard on the Yard gate saw an axe in a man's hand as they turned right into the outer courtyard. He yelled to his colleagues on the gate towers to shut the gates immediately. There was a significant delay—the gatemen wanted to know why—but the gates were closed and the bars dropped just in time, and runners were sent through the side doors to tell General Aelius' office that something was going on at City Yard.

Several commentators have speculated that had the message Aelius received been rather more specific, events might have taken a different turn. That, however, is unlikely. In the event, Aelius interpreted 'something going on at City Yard' as either a riot or an outbreak of fighting between Blues and Greens supporters (it happened to be a race day); accordingly, he sent twenty-five men in police armour, armed with batons and minimal side arms. When they reached the Yard, they found that the raiders had already burst through the gate, using benches from the Yard chapel as improvised battering rams.

Captain Trachea, commanding the twenty-five guards, came in for the brunt of the criticism at the inquiry. This is understandable, if only because it's usually simpler and more conciliatory to established interests to blame a dead man with no family. With hindsight, it's hard to imagine what else Trachea could possibly have done. He commandeered every cart, barrel and bench he could find, and every able-bodied man he could catch, and built a barrier that proved, in the event, to be quite effective. As Basso said

privately after the inquiry had reported, nobody in his right mind could have expected Trachea to lead his twenty-five men with sticks against six hundred with real weapons, and arrest them. As for the allegations of collusion, they rest entirely on the fact that Trachea was a Mavortine. Those who imply that, if there was no actual collusion, Trachea held back because he didn't want to attack his fellow countrymen ignore the fact that at that stage, nobody had any reason to know or even suspect that the attackers were Mavortines.

There is no hard evidence; but educated guesses and reconstructions suggest that the time elapsed between the first raider setting foot on shore and the forced entry into City Yard was no more than twenty minutes. Trachea's men, marching at the double, would have taken six minutes to reach the Yard, at least five more to assess the true significance of the situation, decide on their course of action and take the decision to assemble the barricade. Actual construction of the barricade was, by all accounts, impressively swift; no more than ten minutes. It follows, therefore, that by the time the barricade was in place, the raiders had already been inside the yard for twenty minutes. The only aspect of Trachea's conduct for which it remains difficult to account is his delay in sending a message to Aelius, to tell him what was happening and call for reinforcements; it would appear that the runner was sent only after the barricade was complete. We can only assume that it slipped Trachea's mind in the heat of the moment, or that there was some misunderstanding as to who was supposed to go.

The City Yard was at that time considerably less well defended than it is now. The encircling wall was only twelve feet high, and the three major buildings—the Mint, Treasury Storage and the Arsenal—were neither fortified nor guarded. Once past the Yard Gate, the raiders would simply have marched up to Treasury Storage, kicked down the door (assuming it wasn't already open, as was often the case), surged inside and started helping themselves to coined money from the stores.

“I was trying to do long division,” Bassano said, “which has never been a strong point of mine, and there was this dreadful row going on down in the Yard. I couldn't concentrate, so I went to the window to shout at whoever was causing it.”

He closed his eyes. Basso noticed that he hadn't touched the large brandy he'd poured for him.

"I couldn't make it out," Bassano went on. "I could see four men lying on the ground, like they were asleep; like drunks passed out after a party. I think I knew instinctively that they were dead, but that made no sense at all, because surely people would be trying to help if there'd been an accident—I wondered if they'd been up on scaffolding working on the gutters—but there was nobody at all in the yard, which really was odd. Also, if the yard was empty, where had all the noise come from?"

He stopped talking, and Basso could see he was staring at the wall, at one particular place on the blank wall, where there was nothing worth looking at. "Are you all right?" he asked, but Bassano didn't seem to have heard him. "Maybe you should get some rest," he said awkwardly, not knowing how you were supposed to treat this condition: herb tea, inhalation of sage and saffron steeped in boiling water, mustard poultice on the forehead to draw out the poisonous memory. His mother would have known; or at least, she'd have ordered some remedy, which wouldn't have worked.

"I'm fine, really," Bassano said. "Where was I?"

"You'd just looked out of the window."

"Oh, right." Bassano grinned weakly. "I do apologise, I sort of lost the thread there for a moment. Anyway, you know me, no common sense whatsoever. I thought that since I was nominally in charge of the place, I'd better go down and take a look. So I went down the back stair—you know, that awful spiral job where if you meet someone coming the other way, you've got to walk backwards up to the next landing? We really should tear it out and put in something decent, before there's an accident."

"Noted," Basso said.

"Thanks. Well," Bassano added, with a laugh that had little to do with humour, "I don't suppose it's going to be too far up your list of priorities, in the circumstances. But you might just bear it in mind." He picked up the brandy, then put it down. "So I went down the stairs, out into the yard, and there still wasn't anybody about; I'd been expecting people to come rushing out, like I'd just done. But I stood there, all on my own in the yard, and—I don't know, it didn't seem real, it was like some big event was going on, a procession or a ceremony or something, and everybody else had been told

about it except me. Stupid way to think, of course, but my mind just went blank. I couldn't seem to get any further than 'all this is very strange'. And I thought, I'd better find someone and ask what's going on. So I turned back to go into the main shop, but the door was shut. I tried the handle, it turned but the door wouldn't open. Crazy, I thought. I looked round; the Arsenal door was shut too, but the door of Treasury Storage was wide open. So I sort of picked up my feet and wandered across."

Basso winced, which made Bassano laugh. "Like I said," he went on, "no more sense than next door's cat. I walked in through the door, and there they were, hundreds of them. Thank God they were busy and didn't see me. I just stood there; I couldn't believe it. They were prising open the barrels—the newly minted stuff, they weren't bothered about the foreign money, which is significant when you think about it. They must've known exactly where to find what they wanted. Anyhow, they were popping the lids off the barrels with the horns of their axes, then baling coins out into sacks with—I believe it was old tin dishes; I guess they must've brought them with them, because I don't remember anything like that lying around in Storage. One man would be holding the sack, another would be leaning over the barrel, scooping. I remember, one of the scoopers lifted his head and he saw me. Eyeball to eyeball, as they say. He looked at me for—well, I don't know how long, seemed to last for ever, couldn't have been more than a pulse beat or two; then he went back to what he was doing, and I realised, I didn't matter, I wasn't a threat, not worth losing time over. Of course, I couldn't see very far into the building, so I had no way of knowing how many of them there were in there. Could've been twenty or a thousand of them for all I knew. But I thought, if I'm not a threat, they can't be worried about being found out and someone calling the guards; and it was only then I started putting things together, the dead men in the yard, and it started dawning on me what was happening."

"Don't blame yourself for that," Basso said. "I don't suppose—"

"Yes, but I do," Bassano said. "I was supposed to be in charge, and a whole fucking *army* just walks in and empties the Treasury, and—"

"Listen." Basso raised his voice a little, and Bassano looked at him. "We're fairly sure there must've been at least five hundred of them. I spoke to Aelius just now. Do you know how many soldiers he's got stationed in the City right now? Not just on call at the guards but all over town, all the

guards and watch patrols and everything? Just under two hundred. So even if they'd all rushed down there the moment they stepped off the boats, we'd have been outnumbered more than two to one. There wasn't anything anybody could've done. That's all there is to it."

"I didn't know that," Bassano said quietly. "And it doesn't really make any difference, does it? I should've been able to do something more constructive than stand there gawping like an idiot, then run like hell back to my office and wedge the door shut with a chair. That's just plain cowardice."

"Once it'd finally sunk in," Aelius said (his face was grey and his skin looked tight over his cheekbones; showing his age, Basso thought), "I realised how completely screwed we were. I still didn't know how many there were. Trachea's men said hundreds, but what's that supposed to mean? More to the point, they'd been in there for some time, they'd cheerfully killed anybody who got in their way and even I'd finally managed to guess what they were after. And I knew there was nothing I could do to stop them."

Basso nodded. "I accept that," he said.

"Thank you," Aelius replied. "Thinking about it, I don't suppose Trachea could've known just how few men we had in the City. It's not common knowledge—not a secret either, it's just one of those things you don't think about. We aren't at war, we don't have a law-and-order problem, nothing bad's ever going to happen to us, so why would we clutter up the City with a lot of armed men we don't need? Well." He shook his head. "I guess they could count on their fingers as well as the next man."

Basso said: "What happened to Trachea and his men?"

"My fault," Aelius said briskly. "I should've been quicker off the mark. Given the information available to him, Trachea did the right thing: bottle them up in the Yard so they can't get out, call for reinforcements. Of course, there weren't any reinforcements worth a damn, and all he'd done was make things worse. Soon as they'd finished looting Treasury Storage they came back out again, found that some fool had blocked their way with a load of carts, and forced their way through. Trachea, being a brave soldier,

tried to stop them, and they went through him and his men like they weren't there."

"What did you do?"

"Me?" Aelius laughed. "As soon as I saw they were coming through, I told my fifty or so men to get the hell out of there, and I personally ran as fast as I've ever run in my life. By the time I stopped, I was in Cornmarket, and people were staring at me, wondering why this exhausted man in uniform had just collapsed on the steps of the Exchange."

Basso didn't say anything for a while. Then he said: "I assume you'd realised that they would return to their ships by the shortest route possible, and that if left alone they'd do no further harm; in which case—"

"No such thing," Aelius interrupted; he sounded angry. "It was sheer terror. Not the first time, either. The second battle I was in, I ran away. One moment we were all in line, spears levelled, sergeant calling out orders by the numbers; next thing I knew I was in some barn somewhere, hiding under a load of straw. I was desperately ashamed of myself for a while, until I talked to other soldiers about it, and guess what: they'd all done something like it, at one time or another. It's what happens. Armies don't stand their ground and butcher each other down to the last man. One side or other always runs away, and when you run, you *run*." He shook his head. "I can't expect you to understand," he said. "No civilian could. As far as you're concerned, it was unforgivable cowardice in the face of the enemy. Which it was," Aelius added. "And I'll say as much to the court martial."

Basso scowled at him. "Don't be stupid," he said. "There won't be any court martial. I'm directly answerable for your actions to the House."

"Ah." Aelius nodded slowly. "I see."

"Good. As far as everybody but you and me are concerned, you stood your ground, only withdrawing when you realised that further resistance would inevitably result in pointless civilian casualties. Sort it out with your people; I don't want any inconsistencies."

Aelius nodded. "Understood," he said. "Does that mean I still have a job?"

"Of course you do," Basso snapped. "You think that with all this on my plate, I've got the time or the energy to find someone else? Last thing I need is to have to work with a stranger at a time like this."

“Well?” Basso asked.

Cinio took a long time to answer. “Nothing,” he said. “Well, about sixteen thousand nomismata, spilled on the floor while they were filling the sacks. Plus the foreign coin for melting, which they didn’t touch, and what was actually in the Mint shop, say another twenty thousand. That’s it.”

Basso said: “The foreign money.”

“It’s your bloody nephew’s fault,” Cinio said. “Since he’s been in charge, production’s up by nearly a third. A quarter of a million, if that; all the rest had already been melted down and restruck.”

When he spoke again, Basso’s voice was level and calm. “So,” he said, “as far as we know, the cash reserve of the Republic stands at around two hundred and eighty thousand, as against...” He glanced at the paper on his desk. “Twenty million, this time yesterday. All the rest of it’s gone, we don’t know where, and we have no idea if we can get any of it back. That’s true, isn’t it?” Suddenly he laughed, and a huge smile spread on his face like blood from a wound. “We’re broke,” he said. “The Republic has no money.”

Cinio stared at him, then grinned. “Yes,” he said, “that’s right. No money.”

Basso leaned back until his chair creaked, and put his hands behind his head. “Let’s just think about that,” he said. “We can’t pay anybody for anything. We can’t pay the guards, or the street sweepers, or the highways division, or the men who put oil in the street lamps in Portgate, we can’t pay the builders or the masons, we can’t service thirty million nomismata’s worth of debt, all the state guarantees to business are worthless; we can’t hire soldiers to go to Mavortis to look for our money, and even if we could we can’t pay any oarsmen to row them there in our fleet of not-yet-paid-for warships. We’re so totally and comprehensively screwed, I can’t think of anything that could possibly make things worse. Really I can’t,” he added, “and I’m a pessimist. It’s so perfect it’s practically beautiful. So,” he said, still smiling, “what do we do now?”

To say that the Republic was bankrupt (the First Citizen told the House) was not just totally false; it was also misleading and criminally irresponsible. The Republic had lost assets to the value of twenty million

nomismata. In movable goods alone, not counting real estate, the Republic still had assets in excess of a hundred million nomismata, while its realty was worth between five and ten times that amount. To talk of national bankruptcy was absurd, and anybody who continued to speak in such terms would be doing the Vesani people a grave disservice.

The stolen money would, of course, be recovered. Such a vast sum could not be dispersed through conventional banking anywhere in the world before the Republic's agents found it and reported its whereabouts to the government, whereupon immediate and devastating reprisals would be launched. No sane foreign banker would touch the money, no government would allow it to cross their border. Even if the thieves buried the money in the middle of the desert, Vesani intelligence would find it. It was, quite simply, too much money for anyone to get away with.

Until then, clearly, the Republic would have to adopt various expediences in order to function. For all official transactions, therefore, paper money would be issued, backed by government land. Each paper note would bear a promise to repay, in gold coin, at a given date, and that promise would be honoured. For foreign business, and in particular the hiring of mercenary troops, gold coin could not be replaced by paper without the risk of triggering a crisis of confidence. Accordingly, the First Citizen said, the Bank of Charity & Social Justice had that morning agreed to loan the Treasury its entire reserve of coined gold money, amounting to eight million nomismata, on the security of land debentures. Further, the Bank was placing its entire credit at the government's disposal, enabling the Treasury to borrow from the Bank at will, without delay or formality, for the duration of the crisis. The First Citizen added that he had not, unfortunately, had an opportunity to discuss the situation with the heads of the Republic's other banks, and he could not, therefore, speak for them; however, he had every confidence that they would follow the Charity's lead, especially with regard to the provision of gold coin. On that assumption, he could assure the House that by close of business that day, the Treasury would once again be able to call upon cash reserves of at least twenty million nomismata. In simple terms, he told the House, the money was there. There was a problem. Indeed, there was a crisis, and the Vesani people had suffered an insult unprecedented in their history. But to talk, as some members of the Opposition had been doing, of a disaster, of the end of

the Republic as they knew it, was utterly absurd, and he could only guess at the motivation of the individuals concerned.

As for blame, he said, there would be plenty of time for that later. As yet, the full facts of the matter were unknown; until they knew who had stolen the money, whether or not they had had the help of Vesani accomplices, whether the military authorities had had any reason to suspect that such a crime was being planned, it would be pointless and counterproductive to find fault. When the time came and all the necessary information had been assembled, a board of enquiry would make an informed decision and action would be taken. Until then, it was the duty of the House and the First Citizen to work together as never before to heal the Republic's wounds and see to it that damage to the state's interests was kept to the bare minimum. On that basis, he commended his proposed plan of action to the House.

"Basso," Antigonus said, leaning forward a little, so that his sleeve was in danger of catching fire in the candle-flame, "we haven't got eight million nomismata."

"I know," Basso said.

"You know." Antigonus nodded slowly. "Well, that's a comfort. You may be reckless to the point of insanity, but at least you're properly informed. What in God's name possessed you?"

"It's not a problem," Basso said sharply. "The other banks have covered the remaining twelve million, and I know for a fact, they really are good for the money. We'll draw down on them first. Think about it," he added, as Antigonus shook his head. "Reserves are reserves, right? Reserves are money you squirrel away because you know you won't need it, but one day you just conceivably might. So long as everyone believes the money's there, we won't need to touch a nomisma of it."

Antigonus scowled at him. "Very well," he said. "You gambled everything on shaming the other banks into—"

"A very safe bet," Basso said. "Also, it's a good loan, they'll be getting four per cent. I'm just sorry we'll miss out." He smiled, and said, "Admit it. I did all right."

"That remains to be seen."

"I did all right," Basso repeated, a little louder and slower. "The coined money isn't really the issue. In case you missed it, we've also given the government an unlimited line of credit in paper loans. Which means, of course, that we can lend the government as much as we like, at one per cent over base, for as long as we like. Now that," he added with relish, "is the sort of deal you dream about. Well?"

Antigonus sighed. "That wasn't why you did it."

"No. Does it matter?"

"Tell me why you did it."

"To save General Aelius' neck," Basso replied. "And mine too, I suppose. Will that do?"

Antigonus looked at him. "That was the reason? Really?"

Basso breathed out, long and slow. "I'd like to give it a pretty name, like loyalty," he said. "Truth is, I tend to get used to having the same people round me. I was damned if a bunch of pirates was going to lose me my pet soldier. Besides which, I owe him."

"Because of when your wife died."

"Partly." Basso sat up in his chair. "But anyway," he said. "You asked, and I've told you. And you've got to say it out loud. I did all right."

"You did all right."

"Thank you."

"Basso." Antigonus was looking straight at him. "We have a serious liquidity problem. You know we do."

"I know," Basso said quietly. "And I'm going to do something about it, don't you fret. I don't know, though," he added, and for the first time since the news broke, he felt tired. "Maybe I should've seen it coming. All the world brings its gold here, to a shed in a yard in the middle of town, and we're surprised when thieves show up and rob us. Do you think I've been guilty of ordinary thinking?"

Antigonus shook his head. "You can't think of everything."

"Since when?"

Inguiomera, second city of the Mavortine Confederacy, was at that time still little more than two rings of earth-and-turf ramparts around the top of a steep hill overlooking the mouth of the River Tiwas. Inside the inner ring,

building was forbidden; the grassy plateau was kept clear to provide grazing for the flocks and herds of the Ingui people in the event of an attack. Between the rings, however, houses and other structures were beginning to sprout up, mostly for the use and convenience of foreign traders and the high-caste Mavortines who did business with them. The largest and most impressive building, designed and constructed by Auxentine contractors, was the Grand Lodge, where the tribes met once a year to resolve existing feuds and start new ones. There was a small and unpopular temple of the Invincible Sun, paid for by the Vesani Mission (stone-built and slate-roofed, for convenience of rebuilding every time it was burnt down). There was a market hall and a corn exchange, used only by foreigners; lodges for Sclerian, Auxentine and Vesani visitors; and a number of small shops and workshops, some of them used by Mavortines.

The barber's shop on the east side was one of the more surprising successes. Although Mavortines of every caste professed nothing but scorn for the civilised nations of the south, they were increasingly prepared to make an exception when it came to their hair. Fashions, chosen apparently at random from the three major foreign cultures, came and went with bewildering speed. The Sclerian bob, often disconcertingly combined with the Vesani smooth chin and the luxuriant Auxentine moustache, swiftly gave way to the Auxentine plait (but with full Mavortine beard), which in turn was ousted by the Sclerian tonsure (with the Vesani smooth upper lip and the Auxentine forked beard), until supplanted in its turn by Vesani layering, the Mavortine moustache and the waxed-spike chin-only beard copied from Auxentine coins of the previous century. The barber, a Mavortine with nomad Hus on his mother's side, employed six men (including a genuine Vesani, who'd left the Republic in a hurry for legal reasons) and two women, and his shop was generally regarded as the social hub of Inguiomera.

A week after the raid on the Vesani Treasury, a man nobody had seen before walked rather diffidently into the barber's shop and looked round, clearly uncertain of the procedure. He was shown to the only vacant chair and asked what he wanted. He replied that he wasn't sure, it was his first time in a place like this, but he wanted the best and was prepared to pay for it. The barber assured him he'd put his best man on the job, and beckoned to the renegade Vesani.

The style, or combination of styles, employed on this occasion was a fairly monumental piece of work, taking a substantial amount of time, because the bill came to seven stury, best part of a day's wages for a skilled man. The customer didn't seem to mind; he paid with a gold coin, told the barber to keep the change, and left.

The Vesani hairdresser was a quick thinker, though not a particularly deep one, which was why he now found himself in the Mavortine Confederacy. He slipped the gold coin into his mouth, put seven stury of his own money into the takings pot, and saw to the next customer. Some time later, on the pretext of relieving himself, he went outside, took the coin out of his mouth and tucked it inside his shoe, where it remained for the rest of the day.

His initial intention had been to take it to the money changer on the south side and convert it into stury. On his way there, however, he paused to examine it under a lamp, and changed his mind. Instead, he went to the Vesani lodge and demanded to see the resident.

At that time, the office of Vesani resident in Inguiomera was largely informal, shared between those of the senior merchants who could be bothered to do it. On that particular day, it happened to be the turn of Brenno Reliano, a minor cousin of the wrong side of the Aureliani banking family, aged nineteen years and on his first trip abroad. He'd been in the Confederacy for three days.

As soon as Brenno saw the coin, he realised that he was looking at his passage home. He asked the hairdresser where he'd got it, and was told the full story. No, the hairdresser hadn't seen where the man had gone and he hadn't mentioned his name or anything like that, but he shouldn't be hard to find. Just look for a Mavortine with a Sclerian skinhead, bushy whiskers and a beard like a six-inch nail.

Brenno thanked the hairdresser and, on the pretext of getting him a drink, escorted him to a small storage bay and locked him in. Then he rounded up all the Vesani in the lodge, explained what he'd found, and asked what they should do next.

Going to the authorities (Brenno's own suggestion) was dismissed out of hand. For one thing, there were no authorities in a Mavortine town; for another, it was extremely unlikely that any Mavortine would choose to help a foreigner against one of his own kind. If anything was to be done, they'd

have to do it themselves. Four men refused to have anything to do with any form of violent action; that left twelve men, to search the entire settlement before the suspect could get away. A vote was taken, and it was reluctantly agreed that they should look for allies among the other foreigners.

The Auxentines refused to help, on principle; the Sclerians, however, agreed to join the search, in return for a third share in any cash reward, plus trading privileges to be agreed later. There were seventeen of them, and they also provided the Vesani with short swords and stab-proof shirts from their trading stock, at practically cost.

In the event, they didn't have to look far. There were nine inns and seven beer halls inside the rings, in the fifth of which they found their man. There was a brief scuffle, but nothing to excite interest; they hauled the man outside, cut his purse off his belt, and found it was stuffed with newly minted Vesani nomismata, all bearing the head of Bassianus Severus. They marched the man back to the Vesani lodge for questioning.

Interrogation, according to the old Guild maxim, is no job for amateurs. Needless to say, neither the Vesani nor the Sclerians had any knowledge of scientific procedure, so they had to rely on brute force, first principles and enthusiasm. As a result, when the prisoner finally agreed to talk, they had the greatest difficulty in understanding what he was trying to tell them. Eventually, they got what they wanted: the name of a village, a dozen miles or so to the south.

At first light, a Vesani sloop left the estuary and sailed straight home. On board were the Mavortine and the Vesani hairdresser (who received a full pardon for his earlier indiscretions, and a pension of twenty nomismata a year for life, paid by the First Citizen personally). General Aelius' professional interrogators quickly confirmed that, in their opinion, the prisoner was telling the truth. After a brief meeting with Basso, Aelius and two Treasury officials boarded the sloop and set sail. Instead of going direct to Inguiomera, however, they made for Anno, the nearest town of any size on the Cazar Peninsular.

It was the first time Aelius had been home for over thirty years, but he was in a hurry. He hired a horse in Anno and rode for twelve hours into the foothills of the Great Crest mountains, where his mother's family had come from. Forty-eight hours later he was back, with sixty distant cousins, discreetly but effectively armed and bound by the most dreadful oaths of

loyalty and good faith recognised by Cazar tradition. The rest of the men, he told the Treasury officers, would be along in a day or so.

The Treasury men had chartered a caravel for Aelius and his party. They themselves stayed in Anno and were lucky enough to find a Vesani stone barge, which had come to collect marble from the quarries. Using the letter of authority Basso had given them, they requisitioned it, bought supplies, and had it ready to rendezvous with Aelius' party and load up the stolen gold assuming (big assumption) that it had been recovered. They also managed to commandeer a grain freighter for the two hundred Cazar.

Thanks to a freak turn of the wind, Aelius was already in Inguimera. He disembarked alone, went straight to the Vesani lodge and was given the map he'd been promised. Two hours after sunset (it was pitch dark and raining) he led his sixty cousins south to the blind side of the ridge overlooking the village the prisoner had told him about. He waited until just before dawn.

There was nothing complex about his strategy. He sent twenty men to go round the other side of the village, taking care to keep below the ridge for as long as possible. Half an hour later, he led the rest of his men down the hill at a brisk run. At the village gate, he detached two parties of ten men to go ahead and drive villagers from the outer houses towards the centre. With the remaining twenty, he worked from the centre out.

It went well. Two villagers, a young man and a boy, slipped between the outer and inner flushing parties and had to be shot; after that, there was no trouble. When all the villagers had been herded together in front of the main lodge, Aelius explained the situation to them through an interpreter. Time, he said, was of the essence. Although he and his men had been as quiet and unobtrusive as possible, it wouldn't be long before the alarm was raised and the men who'd buried the gold in or near their village came rushing out to protect their treasure. Being a cautious man, he estimated he had something like four hours. (There was a problem with the word hour; the interpreter had to point at the sun and wave his arms.) Much to his regret, therefore, he could only allow himself the time it would take him to count to five hundred before he'd have to start killing villagers, five at a time. On this schedule, assuming nobody was prepared to tell him what he needed to know, he'd have time to execute fifty of them; then he'd have no choice but to drive the rest of them into the lodge, wedge the doors from the outside

and set fire to the roof. He thanked them for their attention and began counting.

At three hundred and forty, a man stood up and led him to one of the village's six wells. It was all down there, he said; the well was dry, and they'd sewed it all up in goatskins and dropped it in. Aelius sent a man down on a rope; he came back up with a goatskin sack gripped in both hands.

Thanks to the impression he'd made on them, Aelius had no trouble persuading the villagers to deal with getting the gold out of the well. He detailed ten men to watch them, and stationed the remaining fifty around the village perimeter to watch for new arrivals. In the event, his estimate of four hours proved to be remarkably accurate. He immediately pulled his men back inside the village, barred the gate and went up onto the watchtower to open negotiations. But the raiders shot arrows at him, so he withdrew and stood to his defence.

His position was not as bad as he'd originally assumed. The village was surrounded by a ditch and bank, topped by a palisade of eight-inch fir trunks. There was only one gate, commanded by one watchtower. The gate itself was reasonably solid, with stout hinges and bars. He put the ten of his men who had bows in the tower; they quickly demonstrated that they were much better shots than the enemy, who pulled back out of range to consider their options. The tower detail counted heads as best they could and put the size of the opposing force at less than two hundred. Aelius was greatly encouraged; that put the numbers well within the approved offensive/defensive ratio, and the enemy appeared to have little or no understanding of siege procedures. He, on the other hand, had food and hostages. His main disadvantage was the lack of a catwalk or fighting platform on his side of the palisade; apart from that and his limited stock of arrows, he was modestly confident that he could hold the status quo. Everything would depend, therefore, on which arrived first: his reinforcements, or the rest of the raiding party. To buy a little extra time, he had the interpreter shout out a warning that if the raiders didn't withdraw to double bowshot immediately, he would execute two hostages. The raiders made no move, so Aelius had ropes put round the necks of the two villagers who'd been shot earlier, and hung them off the tower. The raiders screamed at him and shot a few arrows (which fell short), then backed off a further

two hundred yards. They stood around for a while, then sat down cross-legged on the turf.

Aelius discussed the situation with his cousins, who agreed with him that the enemy would most likely attack an hour or so before dawn. Aelius therefore decided he would attack an hour after midnight. As soon as it was dark he set a party of villagers to digging a tunnel under the palisade into the ditch, on the opposite side of the village to the gateway and the tower. When the time he'd chosen came, he left ten of his men to guard the villagers and keep a lookout from the tower, then led the rest of his force through the tunnel. They took a long detour, eventually coming out on the blind side of the slope just above the place where the enemy were. They crept to the top of the crest and ran down towards the campfire the raiders had thoughtfully lit, around which most of them were now sleeping.

In so far as they could think at all, woken from sleep by hostile yells and the screams of their wounded colleagues, the enemy naturally assumed that the men invading their camp and slaughtering them at will must be Vesani reinforcements. Quite sensibly and properly, they ran, most of them not bothering to pick up their weapons. Those who stayed, through drowsiness or valour, were quickly dealt with. Aelius told his men to leave their bodies where they lay and get back to the village, just in case the fugitives came back. However, he made a point of collecting all the abandoned weapons they could find by firelight, in particular bows and arrows. Then he retired to the village.

It's safe to assume that the fugitives knew which direction their reinforcements were coming from, and ran to tell them what had happened. They arrived two hours after dawn, to find thirty of their colleagues lying dead on the grass and the village gate firmly shut. As far as they were aware, the sixty or so men who'd taken the village had been reinforced by an unknown but quite substantial number of allies, at least doubling the garrison. That put the odds at something in the order of five to one—marginal but acceptable according to the tables at the back of Aelius' copy of *The Art of War*; rather less inviting to the raiders, whose respect for their enemy had increased significantly. There was some sort of council of war, which Aelius watched with interest from the tower. Then a small number of raiders went off in a hurry, while the rest sat down, comfortably out of bowshot.

It was easy enough for Aelius to reconstruct the arguments used during the council. One faction would have insisted on sending for reinforcements. The opposition would have pointed out that that would entail telling their neighbours at least the bare outline of events, which in practice would mean inviting the entire Mavortine Confederacy to come and share the loot with them. Further, there was no way of knowing how many more Vesani were on their way; the longer they delayed, the greater the risk not only of losing the treasure but of being killed or (probably worse) captured and taken back to the City. True, they were in no position to rush the gate and break it down in the face of determined and highly professional opposition. The one advantage they had was numbers; if they attacked the gate and simultaneously dug their way under the palisade, preferably in two places, they had a chance of dividing the garrison and overwhelming them. Otherwise, they might as well go home, pack their belongings and emigrate; it would be interesting to see how far they'd get before the Vesani tracked them down.

Moved, therefore, that they send a small number of men to the nearest large farm, to buy, borrow or steal digging equipment, carts and horses. Voted on and approved by something in the order of a two-thirds majority.

The commandeering party came back with four hay carts and a lumber wagon. They used the carts as mobile cover for the sapping parties (in effect, reinventing the pavisé from first principles; Aelius was impressed) and the garrison quickly stopped wasting arrows on them. There were, after all, other expedients, approved by the Book and standard procedure. When the Mavortine sappers were about halfway through, they were startled and horrified to find a hole caving in the side of their trench, out of which crawled armed men: Aelius' cousins had dug a tunnel of their own. They chased the survivors of the sapping parties out of the ditch as far as the carts, then stopped, dragged the carts into the open away from the palisade, smashed four spokes out of each cartwheel, and retired to their tunnel, which they filled in after them with previously prepared sacks of rubble.

Aelius, meanwhile, had been lucky. While ransacking a house for sacks to fill with rocks, he found something he definitely hadn't expected to find, but which filled his heart with joy: a jar of good-quality refined shipwrights' pitch, bearing an Auxentine revenue seal. With this crucial ingredient in hand, he had no trouble finding lamp oil; sulphur was another

unexpected bonus. There was only one suitable pipe in the village, running down the side of the lodge, but the smithy provided him with a fine double-action bellows, and the shoemaker had an adequate stock of thick tanned hide. After that, all he had to do was choose between half a dozen entirely suitable large iron kettles.

Shaken by the disastrous failure of the undermining attempts, the raiders decided to put everything into a full-scale assault on the gate. They had one cart left; they filled it with rocks, for weight, and tied in it lengthways the trunk of the only decent-sized oak tree within ten square miles, which happened to grow on the ridge overlooking the gate. As they manhandled their improvised ram towards the gate they suffered cruelly from the accurate and surprisingly far-reaching archery of the defenders in the tower; however, for each man shot, another rushed to take his place, and as they came to the last ten yards of their distance, they began to feel a faint but distinct degree of hope.

Then the gate suddenly swung open, just enough to reveal one end of an ordinary baked-clay water pipe. One of the raiders had the experience or the intuition to yell a warning and jump clear, but if his colleagues realised why he was so terrified, they had no time to react.

The first recorded use of Vesani fire by the Republic's navy was in AUC 576, over four centuries previously; and ever since the recipe for the infamous incendiary compound, which burned even on water and which Vesani ships shot at their enemies with a giant syphon through a tube, was one of the Republic's most closely guarded secrets. Even Aelius didn't know it; but he knew that the closest anyone else had ever come to duplicating it was by mixing pitch, lamp oil, sulphur and distilled birch resin. The workings of the projector were common knowledge, since examples had been recovered from wrecked Vesani ships; you simply passed a jet of air through a vessel full of the compound down a tube, in the mouth of which you'd previously stuffed a handful of smouldering rag or moss.

All the Mavortines knew about Vesani fire was that it was certain death—if it hit you, there was no way of putting it out, not even if you jumped into the sea. In the event, Aelius' improvised projector only worked indifferently well; it sent an impressive jet of flame just over the heads of the men pushing the ram, missed the ram itself and set fire to one side of the

cart, which burnt in a gradual and unspectacular manner for the rest of the day. That didn't seem to matter, as far as the raiders were concerned. All they knew was that the garrison was armed with the Vesani Republic's deadliest and most secret weapon, and they had no interest whatsoever in getting any closer to it than they could help.

The debate that followed was passionate and bitter and lasted well into the night. Aelius was tempted to try another sortie, but resisted the temptation; his position was now comfortably strong, and a failed sortie was one of the few ways he could bring about his own defeat. He contented himself with shooting a few fire-arrows; they fell well short, but each time one streaked through the sky, the raiders stopped talking and stayed silent for some time.

Just in case, Aelius had thought out a number of strategies, both passive and active, for the next day. In the event, they weren't needed. His Cazar reinforcements arrived in the night, waited in the approved manner until just before dawn, and attacked. Aelius immediately led his men out of the village to take the enemy in flank and rear. There was no real resistance, and the standard encirclement manoeuvre Aelius used to keep any of the raiders from getting away worked perfectly. When there were fifty or so of them left, Aelius halted the massacre and accepted their surrender; the Vesani, he knew, would feel cheated in spite of everything if they had nobody to execute.

In the event, the fifty prisoners made very useful porters. One thing the Treasury men hadn't been able to procure at Anno was carts; which meant that they would have to carry twenty million nomismata down to the sea on their shoulders. To make matters worse, the nearest isolated and unfrequented anchorage capable of accommodating the stone barge was twelve miles away; fifteen, if they were sensible and took the long way round to avoid coming too close to the next village.

Even with the prisoners, Aelius recognised that he had no choice but to press-gang the villagers as porters; he would need at least fifty of his two hundred and seventy-eight men as guards, able to move fast and use their weapons. This would mean they would be both slow and conspicuous, and he had no doubts at all that the arrival of his reinforcements had been noticed in Inguiomera and had excited local curiosity. He would be in difficult, unfamiliar country (unfamiliar to him, but not to the people most

likely to attack him) with only a sixty-year-old map copied by a scholar of the Studium from an unknown, unverified source to guide him. So far, true enough, the map had proved marvellously accurate—a miracle, in the circumstances—but, as he is reported to have said to one of his cousins at the time, luck is like an old country bridge: you don't want to have to rely on it when carrying fifteen tons of gold.

His luck held for most of the way. When it ran out, it did so to maximum effect. The band of Mavortines who eventually blocked his way had chosen their ground with care. They waited until Aelius' column had forded, with great difficulty, a deep, fast-flowing river running down from the mountains; then they jumped up from their hiding place among the rocky outcrops that flanked both sides of the only pass marked on the map through the curtain of steep hills that rose above the beach where the stone barge was presumably waiting. Escape to left or right was not attractive. Twenty-five yards on either side of the cattle-drove Aelius had been following, he could see a screen of four-foot-high tussocks of coarse-bladed swamp grass, the unambiguous sign of treacherously wet ground. The drove ran along a causeway, roughly twenty feet wide, six feet or so higher than the marsh, presumably built to allow cattle to be driven down to the sea. If he fell back and tried to escape across the river, the enemy would charge and take him in rear while he was battling with the current. Leaving the causeway and taking his chances in the march would be suicide. Three directions out of four were therefore closed to him, which left him with the cheerful prospect of charging into a narrow defended space, with the enemy commanding the heights above it. Any fool could see that he hadn't brought the Vesani fire projector with him, so the secret-weapon ploy wasn't available this time. He had a hundred men whose hands were free to fight, but at least half of them would be needed to keep the villagers and the captured raiders from running away as soon as his attention was engaged elsewhere.

The last problem was, of course, the least of his worries. In the confined space where the fighting would take place, numbers were as likely to be a hindrance as a help. That was a precept of war, written down in the Book; along with the principle that the best place to attack an enemy is his strongest point, because that's where he least expects it. After a quick

conference with his section leaders, Aelius detached his fifty fighters and led them up the causeway toward the enemy.

They were met with a cloud of arrows, which fell short. That he found encouraging. The enemy, it appeared, were no archers. At a hundred and seventy-five yards range, he called a halt and ordered volleys of six shots rapid, aimed not at the defenders of the pass but the men on the hill. The Mavortines draw their bows to the corners of their mouths; the Cazars draw to the ear, and their bows are recurved and backed with sinew. At a hundred and seventy-five yards, the enemy might as well have been shooting at the sun, but they were comfortably within long range of the Cazars.

They killed no more than a dozen of the men on the slopes, but that wasn't the objective; the rest scampered for the cover of the rocks, at which Aelius gave the order to drop bows and go in. It was a risk: he was charging straight at archers, though the narrow mouth of the pass was only wide enough to allow eight men to stand and shoot. His quick mental estimate had been four shots from eight men in the time it'd take him to run a hundred and seventy-five yards; according to the tables at the back of the Book, that should cost him between six and ten men, a price he had no choice but to pay.

In all likelihood, the speed and ferocity of the charge, together with the unnerving sight of seeing their colleagues on the hill shot down or driven off at an apparently impossible distance, had a bad effect on the nerves of the archers in the pass. They managed to get off three shots each, but their first volley went high, the second was rushed and snatched and scored no hits; two of Aelius' men were hit by the third discharge, but he'd put the men with some form of armour in the front rank, and all three hits glanced off. The archers, having seen with their own eyes that arrows had no effect on these terrible people, dropped their bows and tried to run, only succeeding in barging into their colleagues jammed in behind them. At that point, Aelius' charge went home.

His last order had been: kill as few as possible. Dead bodies, he knew only too well, clog up a narrow space like nothing else. Unfortunately, presented with a confused mass of men who were more concerned with wrestling their way past their own rear echelon than trying to fight, it was an impossible order to follow. Even so, it didn't prove to be an insuperable problem. Scrambling over the mat of dead bodies, they quickly cut through

into the open; the enemy had untangled themselves and run, leaving the road downhill to the sea wide open.

Aelius immediately called a halt. He could still lose the engagement and everybody's lives by pressing on to pursue an enemy he had no real interest in, and there were still enemies on the slopes above and behind him. He went back to the mouth of the pass and waved to his column to advance at the double; then he sent his men up onto the slope to flush out the enemies there.

Having seen the main strength of their force slaughtered and routed, the archers on the hill showed no interest in mounting a desperate counter-attack. They ran; and when Aelius was satisfied that they were going to keep running for some time, he sent twenty men ahead to make sure the road was clear and there were no further ambushes. He followed at the head of the column, forcing a lively pace. With no further annoyance from the enemy, they made it down to the seashore in excellent time, to find that there was no sign of the stone barge.

At that point, Aelius later admitted, he was sure he was going to die. If the ship wasn't there, it could only be because something had happened: it had sunk or been attacked or impounded, and it wasn't going to come. By now, he'd killed so many Mavortines that the obligation to revenge their dead would matter more to their kinsmen than the gold, which meant that dumping the treasure and running away wouldn't solve everything at a stroke. He seriously considered it, however; they could run a lot faster without the weight, and without several hundred prisoners. However, he dismissed the idea. It would be worse than death, he said, to have abandoned the gold and watched the survivors of the ambush help themselves to it, only to be rescued by the slightly delayed stone barge half an hour later. In short, the only option left to him was to sit on the beach and hope the ship came, and that he proceeded to do.

As Aelius had guessed, the ship had had its own adventures to contend with. When the two Treasury officials requisitioned the ship, naturally they didn't tell the crew what it was needed for. But they must have guessed, or overheard an indiscreet conversation between the Treasury men, because as soon as they were out of sight of land, they seized their captain and first mate and secured them in the charcoal hatch, and sent representatives to the Treasury men to tell them that they knew what the mission was, and they

wanted five per cent of the recovered money as their fee for their part of the job.

The Treasury men denied all knowledge of any money, which annoyed the crew, who dropped anchor. The Treasury men then admitted that they were on their way to pick up the stolen gold, but they themselves had no authority to make any sort of deal, so it was pointless holding up the mission and quite probably dooming it to failure in an attempt to extort from them promises that they freely admitted would be worthless. If, however, they cooperated, released the captain immediately and did everything they could to make up lost time, there was still a chance that the mission would succeed, in which case they were quite confident that First Citizen Basso would show his generous gratitude to everybody involved in the recovery, including themselves. If the mission failed because of the crew's actions, however, they held out little or no hope of them ever returning safely to the City; instead, they would most certainly be arrested and charged with piracy, obstructing government agents and quite possibly aiding and abetting the raiders after the fact, any one of which offences carried the death penalty.

They presented their case well, and eventually the crew gave in; by then, however, the wind had dropped, and they had to wait four hours before it came back. By the time they reached the rendezvous point, they were running six hours late and night was falling. There was no sign of anybody on the beach. The crew representatives took this to mean that the mission had failed, and that if anybody was waiting for them, it would be hostile Mavortines. They therefore refused to take the ship in. It was only after a further hour of bitter debate that the Treasury men induced them to launch a boat and go in close, to see if anybody came out to make contact.

By then it was pitch dark, and the boat crew refused to show a light. The most they would agree to do was call out in Vesani and wait for a reply. On their third hail they were answered by Aelius himself (the only Vesani speaker in the party), who assured them that he was there, and asked them what they thought they were playing at.

The captain of the barge pointed out to the Treasury men that beaching the ship in the dark was too dangerous to contemplate. Either they could try and get the gold and the men aboard using the barge's two boats (big enough to carry six men, or two men and five hundredweight of cargo), or

else they would have to wait for daylight. The boat went back to Aelius with these options, and Aelius reluctantly chose the latter. He and his men had been fortunate enough to find a cave, just above the tideline, where they'd cached the gold and the prisoners. If absolutely necessary, they could spend the night there. The ship, meanwhile, should stand out to sea, in case the Mavortines tried swimming out and boarding it.

Dawn brought with it the unwelcome sight of about four hundred Mavortines, drawn up on the beach; presumably the survivors of the fight in the pass, together with as much support as they'd been able to raise in a hurry. It was evident that they had too much respect for Aelius to try and force the cave, even in the dark. Beaching the ship with them there would, of course, be impossible. Aelius was (by his own later admission) at a loss when heralds came forward and asked to negotiate.

Their demands, they felt, were reasonable. They wanted a third of the gold, together with indemnities of a hundred nomismata per man for those of their colleagues who'd been killed at the village and in the pass: a sum which, by their calculations, came to seventy thousand nomismata. In return, they would go away and leave the Vesani to load their ship.

Aelius replied that he would give them a quarter of the gold in full settlement, but in return they would have to help load the other three-quarters. The heralds conferred for a while and said that that was acceptable, provided that the Vesani released the fifty survivors of the original raiding party before they started loading. Aelius said he would release the men, but only when loading was complete. The revised terms were agreed. The heralds went back to their colleagues, and Aelius' men began bringing the gold out of the cave onto the beach. Aelius, meanwhile, flashed the agreed signal to the barge to come in to land.

By the time the ship had been drawn up on the sand, Aelius' men had stacked the gold sacks in two piles. At this point, Aelius released the villagers and told them to run, not walk, down the beach, away from the Mavortine war party; this they were only too happy to do. He sent the fifty prisoners, with their hands firmly tied and linked to each other with a rope, to stand between the two heaps of gold sacks. Then he beckoned the Mavortines to come across and help with the loading. When they were fifty or so yards away, Aelius gave the order for sixty of his men to start shooting. The Mavortines, who had come armed but without their bows and

quivers, were either shot down or put to flight. The rest of Aelius' men formed up in front of the gold, apart from a detachment of fifteen who drove the prisoners up the beach and onto the ship. Once they were safely on board, Aelius' men (apart from the cordon of archers) started loading the gold on the ship. The Mavortines charged, took heavy casualties at seventy-five yards from the archers, fell back and stayed back; it was clear that they'd had enough. Aelius himself waited until the last sack of gold had been loaded before helping shove the barge off the beach; he was pulled aboard out of the sea on a rope.

By the time the barge reached the City, the Treasury men had weighed the gold (there was obviously too much to count each coin) and were able to report that losses, by weight, did not exceed the value of six thousand nomismata. As for the human cost, casualties to the recovery party and the ship's crew amounted to one broken arm (aboard ship), three cases of broken ribs (the armoured men hit by arrows in the pass) and minor cuts and bruises.

Ten

It was an ancient law of the Republic, designed to limit the prestige of individual commanders and curb the cult of personality within the military, that no general should be permitted to make a triumphal entry into the City twice in one year. General Aelius, who hadn't enjoyed the ceremonies the last time, was openly relieved, but Basso felt that something had to be done to mark the occasion. As he told the House during the debate on the wording of the official vote of thanks, it was not merely a case of what Aelius had done, but the manner in which he had done it. The speed, the resourcefulness, the sheer élan of the operation, the fact that Aelius had overwhelmingly defeated the enemy at every turn without the loss of a single man, clearly demonstrated to the whole world that the Vesani Republic, far from being weak, was stronger than ever before. Aelius had turned a potential humiliation into a magnificent victory, and it was essential for its own self-respect that the House should find some appropriate way of honouring him. He therefore proposed that...

"No," Aelius said. "No. Absolutely not."

Basso smiled indulgently at him. "You don't have a say in it, I'm afraid," he said. "The House has voted. It's out of my hands now."

"I won't do it."

"Yes," Basso said gently, "you will. If need be, the Speaker will send armed proctors to your house to drag you there. Cheer up," he added briskly, "back in the old days it was the highest honour the state could bestow, and you'll be the first man in three hundred years—"

“Oh for crying out loud,” Aelius snapped. “Don’t try and put the blame on them; it was all your idea.” He was crouching in his chair, his fingers wrapped round his elbows. “What harm have I ever done you?”

Basso looked at him sternly. “Well,” he said, “for one thing, you’ve cost me personally a great deal of money in lost interest on the loans I won’t now be making to the Treasury. For which,” he added graciously, “I’m prepared to forgive you, but only on condition that you stop acting like a child and do what’s expected of you. If the people of this city don’t get a chance to cheer at you and wave little flags, they’re going to be very unhappy.”

The Order of the Headless Spear was founded in AUC 171, to honour the Paterculi brothers, who held the pass of Rhomphaea for six days against a vast Sclerian army, thereby saving the city. Membership of the Order was reserved for Vesani citizens who by their extraordinary courage and devotion to duty on the battlefield had preserved the City from destruction. The insignia, a simple ashwood pole, recalled the last stand of the Paterculi, when, their spearheads having snapped off in the bodies of their enemies, they fought on with the headless shafts. It was conceded even in official circles that the symbolism was rather unfortunate and provided regrettable scope for low humour and double entendre. Nevertheless, it was one of the Republic’s oldest and proudest traditions, and the origins of the ceremony that went with it had been lost in the mists of antiquity.

Over the centuries, many scholars had tried to make sense of the ritual, and the best gloss they had been able to come up with was as follows. The candidate for admission to the order was stripped naked because the Paterculi had fought so long and so hard that all their armour had been cut away. The candidate rode to Temple on a donkey because the Paterculi, unable to find horses to get them to the pass before the enemy, had commandeered mules from a nearby farm. Why the candidate was obliged to ride the donkey the wrong way round, facing its tail, was uncertain, though it might possibly refer to a later incident, the exploits of Bracteatus against the Lobar, when Bracteatus infiltrated the enemy camp by pretending to be a madman, riding backwards on a draught ox. The ritual pelting of the candidate with pomegranates was almost certainly a reference

to the siege of AUC 207, when the Sclerian army camped outside the walls had mocked the starving citizens within by throwing rotten fruit into the city. There was no obvious derivation for the triple drenching of the candidate's head (in water, wine and whey), although some researchers felt that these elements were survivors of a much older ritual, now totally obscure, which had been incorporated into the Headless Spear ceremony at an early stage of its evolution.

After the third drench, Aelius was towelled off and clothed in a simple sackcloth robe by the laticlavular and angustoclavular tribunes and led up the Temple steps, where he was officially received by the City legate and the deacon of the Studium. His eyes were then blindfolded as he was escorted into the nave of the Temple, while the choir sang "Hail, Invincible Sun" and "Behold Him who in glory". His eyes were uncovered at the foot of the steps of the high altar, where the Patriarch of the Studium presented him with the headless spear, while outside, in accordance with tradition, twelve sergeants from his regiment were supposed to be scattering handfuls of silver and copper coins (provided by the candidate) among the crowds. Since all of Aelius' men had gone straight back to the Cazar Peninsular as soon as they'd been paid, their place was taken by twelve senior NCOs of the City Guard. In another break with tradition, the coins distributed were gold, provided (an open secret) by the First Citizen; they were the very first release of the newly commissioned Victory issue, struck from the stock of foreign gold that the raiders hadn't touched, with Basso's head on one side and on the other, a helmeted, draped and cuirassed bust of General Aelius, holding the headless spear, under the inscription *Saviour Of His Country*.

"It doesn't look anything like me," Aelius said.

Basso laughed. "Everybody hates their portrait on the money," he said. "I remember my father moaned about it for weeks; said they'd made him look like a chicken. And as for that hideous caricature of me—"

"I didn't say I didn't like it," Aelius interrupted. "But this is some hero, not me." He turned the coin over, hesitated and handed it back. "At least I got to see one," he said.

"You'll be sick of the sight of it," Basso replied. "We're minting twenty thousand. Just think. All over the world, thousands of people who've never

seen you will believe you look like that.”

Aelius frowned. “Here, let me see it again,” he said. Basso spun him the coin; he caught it, looked closely and frowned. “One thing,” he said. “The way I’m holding the stick.”

“Ah, yes,” Basso said. “Sorry about that. Open to misinterpretation, especially when it’s worn down a bit. That’s what happens when you have to push things through in a hurry. Still, at least you’ll have a different nickname now, instead of Cowshit.”

Aelius looked at him. “Quite,” he said. He handed the coin back, but Basso waved it away. “Keep it,” he said. “Drill a hole in it and hang it round your neck for a lucky piece.”

“Not likely,” Aelius said. “I can’t afford expensive jewellery. You know,” he went on, “I’m deeply conscious of the honour, and I’m sure most men would give their right arm to have a chance of being totally humiliated in front of a hundred thousand people, but all things considered, I’d rather have had some money. Not a fortune necessarily,” he added, “but just *something* would’ve been nice. At least enough to replace the pair of boots I ruined wading about in salt water.”

Basso shook his head. “Out of the question,” he replied. “It’d be considered the most appalling insult.”

“Oh.”

“Well, of course. Think about it. The Headless Spear’s reserved for citizens; which in practice, back when it was all dreamed up, meant members of the noble families who traditionally ran the army. Goes without saying, they didn’t give a damn about money, since they were all born with far more than anybody could spend in a lifetime. All they cared about was honour. Which is why,” he added, “everybody else involved on our side gets a nice lump sum in cash, and you get a stick.” Basso looked at him, and narrowed his eyes a little. “What’s the matter, Aelius?” he asked. “You’re not short of money, are you?”

Aelius raised his hand, palm outward. “Not in that sense, no,” he said. “And I’m not asking for a pay rise, either. I’m perfectly comfortable on what I’m getting. And, of course, for what I get paid each month, you could buy half the Cazar Peninsula. It’s just...” He turned his head away just a little. “I was thinking about retiring, that’s all.”

Basso’s head shot up. “Out of the question,” he snapped. “Sorry.”

“You gave that a lot of careful thought.”

“Didn’t need to,” Basso said, and when Aelius turned back to face him, he found that Basso was staring at him with a look of barely restrained fury. “I don’t know what I did to deserve that,” Basso went on. “Funny, I’m sure I’d have remembered if I’d stabbed you in the back or had your entire family hunted down and murdered.”

“Don’t give me that,” Aelius said, with a certain degree of bluster. “I’m not indispensable.”

“That’s for me to decide,” Basso replied. “And I’ve decided, and you can’t leave. I couldn’t do without you when everybody was demanding I have you arrested and slung in jail, and I can’t do without you now. That’s all there is to it.” He paused for a moment or so, then went on (quieter and gentler): “Look, if this is anything at all about money, just say how much and I’ll write you a personal draft.” Aelius glowered at him; he smiled. “I knew it wasn’t,” he said. “All right. Is it a protest about having to ride backwards on a donkey with no clothes on? Because that was just show business, for your fellow citizens. You know how it is. Ninety per cent of my job is keeping them entertained.”

Aelius looked down at the floor. “I’m starting to feel my age,” he said.

Basso laughed. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

Aelius looked offended, if anything. “Back home, I’d be an old man. My grandfather died at fifty-six—that’s just five years older than I am now. He didn’t die *of* anything, just wore out.”

“Then be grateful you’ve been living in a civilised country,” Basso replied. “Besides, you didn’t do too badly for an old man the other day.”

Aelius furrowed his brows. “They didn’t want me with them,” he replied. “My mother’s people, when I went to hire them. They said they’d do the job, but they wanted me to stay behind. They said I’d slow them up.”

“Then they were wrong.”

Aelius shrugged. “I had a real job keeping up,” he said. “When they were hardly feeling it, my lungs were bursting and my legs felt like lead. It was only because I had other things on my mind all the time that I didn’t give up and just lie down and pass out. All right, I’m not quite dead yet, but I’m too old for all that bloody running about.”

“Fine,” Basso said impatiently. “And how often are you going to have to do that?”

“I had to the other day.”

“Then train someone to run about for you,” Basso snapped. “Find a good man and teach him how to be you. When you’ve done that, I’ll let you go. Till then, I can’t spare you. Is that clear?”

Aelius looked at him for a moment, then let his shoulders sag. “It’s proof that I’m right,” he said, “that I haven’t got the strength to argue with you.”

“You’ll stay.”

Aelius made a let-me-be gesture. “I only said I was thinking of retiring,” he said. “I mean, what’s wrong with that? I was considering how pleasant it would be to buy a nice house with a bit of land out back somewhere in the southern suburbs. Put on some weight, grow roses. I wasn’t actually about to resign my commission.” He twisted round in his chair, so he could look out of the window. “You’re right about one thing, though. I need to bring on someone I can rely on, for things like this latest business.”

Basso nodded. “A Cazar.”

“Wouldn’t have to be,” Aelius replied. “I went to my mother’s clan because they were the only people I could think of in a hurry who could do the job, and who I’d dare trust with all that money. That’s not to imply Cazars are the world’s best fighting men. Actually, it’d be far better if we had a unit capable of jobs like that stationed here, permanently—picked men, really well trained, assured loyalty...” He frowned. “Why are you pulling that face?”

“Don’t even think about it,” Basso said. “Assured loyalty: who to? What you’re describing is what in other countries they call the palace guard. Bad idea. Next thing you know, they’re running the Republic. We’ve always steered well clear of that sort of thing, thank you very much.”

“Which is why the bandits were able to stroll right up Portgate and rob the Treasury.”

“Maybe.” Basso spread his hands. “And we got the money back. If we’re dumb enough to station a standing army in the City, we stand to lose a hell of a lot more than twenty million nomismata. No, I can see why the idea appeals to you—it’s plain common sense from a military perspective—but politically it’d be plain lunacy. Simple rule. Vesani aren’t soldiers. Vesani *hire* soldiers. They row in the fleet, sure, but that’s quite another

matter. We're the only civilised country in the world that doesn't have an aristocracy that doubles as the military elite. Which is why you don't see so many kings and dictators around the place as you do abroad."

Aelius grinned. "I'm so glad I don't do politics. So, I can't have a City garrison, but I can have an apprentice. Is that about the strength of it?"

He had to wait a full second for an answer. For that second, he got the impression that Basso was miles away. "That's it," Basso said. "A bright young man looking for a good career with prospects. That's exactly what you need."

He went straight from the meeting with Aelius to the House, where the Opposition had tabled a motion calling for punitive action against the Mavortine Confederacy. On the way there, he read through his briefing notes, which told him nothing he didn't already know. There was, of course, no case to answer. In reality there was no such thing as the Mavortine Confederacy. The peace treaty between the nineteen tribes had lasted less than ten years, and that had been ninety years ago. Since then, there had been nothing any civilised man could recognise as a government. The tribal elders had a vague customary authority over their own clans, but clan leadership was decided by a challenge to mortal combat, and leaders tended not to last very long. From time to time a strong man tried to unite his tribe for an attack on a neighbour, but before long he was killed in the ring or poisoned.

As far as the interrogators had managed to find out, the raid on the Treasury had been a purely private-enterprise affair, the raiders being outlaws and exiles drawn from half a dozen different tribes. The organiser (killed on the beach) had been a bricklayer in the City for five years, during which time he'd painstakingly planned every stage of the operation, walking the route to be taken over and over again, memorising distances and times (he couldn't write them down because he was illiterate). When he returned to Mavortis, he spent another two years recruiting, taking infinite care over security so that nobody outside the conspiracy should have the faintest idea what he had in mind; the raiders weren't told which city they'd be attacking until they were on board ship, though a few of them, who'd been in the City themselves, had a shrewd idea. The village wasn't even the ringleader's home; it was just a village close to the sea whose headman had agreed to stash the loot in return for a generous payment. Wiping the

Mavortines off the face of the earth would, therefore, solve nothing. More to the point, it would be a difficult and expensive job; the Mavortine economy was nearly all subsistence farming, which meant there were no stocks of food larger than a single household's winter store. An invasion army would therefore have to take its provisions with it, and there would have to be a long and difficult supply chain. It was a very large country, sparsely populated. Catching the Mavortines would be a protracted, tedious business: they had an endless supply of remote mountains and impenetrable forests to hide in. Starving them out wasn't a practical option, since twelve of the tribes were practically nomadic—they could hide themselves and their flocks and herds in the rough country and survive there for years, with no chance of bringing them to battle against their will. Victory, in other words, would be slow, costly and difficult to achieve, or even define; and there was always the risk of defeat, which would do untold damage to the Republic's prestige. The game wasn't worth the candle, and that was all there was to it.

He stopped his chair at the House door, but didn't get out straight away. Instead, he sat reading the brief one more time. It was a splendidly thorough document, put together by a young clerk by the name of Tzimisces, a recent discovery by Antigonus. All the facts, clearly arranged in a logical sequence; sections on geography, society, economy, history, all the statistics neatly tabulated in an appendix; when he'd finished reading, he found himself staring at the page as if the words were one of those children's games, a picture cut up into hundreds of irregularly shaped pieces, which you put back together again. There was a pattern, a shape hidden in among all those facts, dates, numbers, but he wasn't quite sure what it was supposed to be.

Lazio Rufrio opened the debate for the Optimates. He was his usual melodramatic self. An insult to the Vesani people that could only be avenged by blood; the eyes of the world were watching for a hint of weakness; only a show of immediate and overwhelming force would be adequate; the First Citizen's duty to his people to eradicate this nest of thieves, pirates and murderers. Basso could have told him what he was going to say before he opened his mouth, except that Basso would've put it considerably better.

The idea was that Sentio would reply to the opening speech, saving Basso for the closing round. Before he could stand up, however, Basso frowned at him. Puzzled, he settled back in his seat and waited to see what Basso had in mind.

Basso stood up and looked round. He had their attention.

“I support the motion,” he said, and sat down.

Later, it was asserted that the silence that followed his intervention was the longest in the history of the House. How anybody could know that wasn't clear, but it was accepted as true and eventually passed into Vesani political folklore. Nobody on either side knew what to do next. Obviously there was no point in anybody else saying anything. Eventually, the Speaker stood up, looking mildly concussed, and called for a division. The motion was passed unanimously, with no abstentions.

Bassano had taken up fencing. That was quite all right; it was a perfectly acceptable accomplishment for a gentleman, though rather out of fashion these days—somewhere between hawking for captive pigeons and playing the rebec. Basso had insisted that he enrol in the Three Circles Fight, the oldest and most austere fencing school in the City. They taught the authentic, unadulterated Three Circles practice, which Basso himself had reluctantly learned when he was fifteen. There was a tediously high proportion of theory, a lot of which was arcane to the point of semi-religious obscurity, and you didn't learn nearly as many flashy set-piece plays as they taught in the more fashionable schools; but as part of the final exam you had to defend yourself against, among others, a six-foot-tall dock worker armed with an axe and using a three-legged stool as a shield, a Cazar soldier in full armour and a Sclerian with a pitchfork and a long knife, you yourself armed only with your gentleman's walking sword, and no armour. A significant proportion of students failed the final exam, or didn't even attempt it.

Bassano studied hard. In fact, the head of the school wrote to Basso (who'd insisted on weekly reports), he showed a degree of dedication and enthusiasm unusual for someone of his class and background. Basso wasn't surprised; he could guess the reason, though naturally he confirmed his guess by asking his nephew a direct question.

“Simple,” Bassano had replied. “When the raiders came, I was terrified. I knew that when I was standing in the doorway, if one of them had decided to come after me, I wouldn’t even have been able to run, I’d have frozen and he’d have killed me where I stood. That really shocked me.”

Basso said he took the point. “But there’s a hell of a difference between learning fencing in a school and actually being in a fight. I’ve known people who were fencing champions, but in a punch-up in a bar, they were completely useless.”

“Maybe,” Bassano had replied. “But at any rate, it’ll make me feel better. Besides, I never take any exercise. I get out of breath walking up Maltgate.”

Little chance of that, after four weeks at the Three Circles. “Also,” Bassano said, “some of the theoretical stuff is actually quite interesting. When you were there, did you do the thing where you break down the stages in the flight of an arrow?”

“And you end up proving the arrow never actually gets there?” Basso grinned. “Yes, of course. I thought it was ridiculous. Gratuitous neo-Mannerist mysticism. The arrow does get there, so it’s fatuous.”

“I can believe you thought that,” Bassano said with a grin. “I bet you told the Master so, too.”

“Good God, no.” Basso raised his eyebrows. “He’d have made a point of explaining it all over again. I just tried to look respectful and stay awake.”

At Basso’s request, the Master introduced a number of extra items into the curriculum, though he neglected to tell the students that they weren’t part of the traditional course. These were mostly standard drills from the military book of forms (Aelius’ recommendations): basic form for infantry against charging cavalry, two forms for infantry with shield against archery bombardment, close-order sword and shield in the event of a *mêlée* following the collapse of the shield wall (for which the Master had to bring in a drill sergeant from the Guard, since none of his adepts knew it).

“Which is odd,” Bassano commented at dinner, “because I was talking to some of the men in the class above, and they didn’t do any of this military stuff. They all did advanced defensive geometry in fifth week.”

“I think they like to vary the syllabus a bit,” Basso replied. “Certainly, we did a few bits and pieces of military drill when I was there. Good for

general fitness and agility training, they told us.”

Bassano shrugged. “Well, I don’t mind,” he said. “I’d rather do that than endless repetitions of the salute. That bit where you move your back foot across to the right while keeping the left leg perfectly straight...”

Basso groaned. “Tell me about it,” he said. “I gave up trying to get that right. Cost me two marks in the exam, but I got them back in bonus points by breaking the Cazar’s arm.”

At Basso’s suggestion, Bassano undertook the accelerated course, which meant doing both parts back to back, without the usual three-week recess. Basso made sure he was there for the exam, which was held in the school’s main drill hall, a converted monastery chapel.

The news that the First Citizen was sitting in the middle of the front row caused a certain degree of panic in the waiting room, where the candidates sat on plain wooden benches, fidgeting with their sandal straps or desperately trying to memorise forms from the textbook.

“My uncle,” Bassano explained.

“Shit,” commented a tall young man from the wrong side of the Trinculani family. “You never said anything about that.”

Bassano shrugged. “Didn’t seem relevant.”

“And he’s come to see you fight, has he?” asked a massively constructed junior Velleius.

“I guess so. He sent me a note to say he would drop by if he had time.”

The Trinculanus boy pulled a sour face. “Well then,” he said, “you’ll have no worries. Bound to pass, aren’t you?”

“I hope so,” Bassano said. “Though I’m a bit concerned about my footwork in double time.”

A provincial Lupercus made a sort of snorting—grunting noise. “You’ll pass,” he said. “The fix’ll be in. They wouldn’t dare fail the First bloody Citizen’s nephew.”

Bassano frowned. “Actually,” he said, “knowing my uncle, if he had reason to believe there’d been anything like that, he’d probably buy the school just to close it down. He’s old-fashioned about that sort of thing.”

The Velleius boy shrugged. “Whatever,” he said. “All right for you. We could do without the pressure.”

“Oh,” Bassano said. “Well, if you want, I could send him a note asking him to wait outside till it’s my turn. But he’d be disappointed. He said he

was looking forward to watching the fencing.”

At this point, a Saturninus-by-marriage implored them all to shut up, because some people were trying to study, and they all sat glowering at Bassano until the first candidate was called. They weren’t allowed to watch, but they could hear the audience.

“Sounds bad,” Bassano commented, after a loud communal gasp filtered through the wall.

“Shut up, you,” said the Trinculanus boy.

Bassano made a show of pursing his lips. About a minute later, there was a thump that made the floor shake, followed by silence. Then the herald came in for the next candidate. “Manlio Velleio,” he called out. The Velleius boy went white, picked up his sword, dropped it and picked it up again.

“Good luck,” Bassano said.

“Go fuck yourself,” the Velleius boy hissed at him through his teeth.

Bassano shrugged, took a copy of Diophanes’ *On Being and Reality* out of his kitbag, found his place and began to read.

When it was his turn, Bassano stood up quite easily, and found he wasn’t nervous at all. A chapter of Diophanes had taken his mind off the various glaring holes in his technique that had cost him last night’s sleep; when he picked up his sword and buckled it to his belt, his fingers weren’t stiff and didn’t shake. “Well, hope it goes well for you fellows,” he said blithely to the room in general, and walked through the door into the hall.

He’d been in there many times, of course, but never when it was crowded with people. He looked for Basso and saw him straight away; he was wearing his plain black (had he just come from a debate in the House?), but round his neck he wore the thin gold chain and seven-pointed star of an Adept of the Three Circles Fight—just one degree below Master, and the highest award you could earn without staying on to do postgraduate research. For a split second it crossed his mind that Basso must’ve borrowed it for the occasion, or maybe it was one of those honorary degrees that you get for being famous. But he knew his uncle wouldn’t wear an order he wasn’t entitled to. Basso caught his eye and grinned; he grinned back, and felt cheerful again.

His first bout was solo, a display of three compulsory forms, two of his choice and one freestyle, his own composition (he’d be marked on his

choice of components as well as his accuracy and style). As he started the routine, he let his mind wander; it was better to do solo forms in a mindless state. Basso had been very keen for him to do this. It had been Bassano's own idea, but the level of support and encouragement had been exceptional, even coming from his uncle. Why, he wondered; because Basso himself was an Adept, or because it was the proper thing for a young gentleman to do? Both perfectly sound reasons, neither satisfactory.

He was broken out of his train of thought by enthusiastic applause, so presumably he'd finished the routine, and done so without tripping over his feet. Fine. Now it was about to get difficult.

The first fight was standard academic fencing, walking sword against walking sword, with Zeuxis, his Director of Studies. Naturally, Zeuxis kept a stone face during the salute, but he knew he'd get a fair bout. Zeuxis liked him; he'd structure the bout to allow Bassano to display his strengths. In the event, he did better than he'd expected, conceding only three hits and even scoring one of his own. That meant a bonus mark.

Next was the Cazar. The school bought its Cazars from the Eudaimonides Brothers, dealers in quality personnel since AUC 878. You had no idea which one you were going to face in the exam, but Bassano had made a point of fighting as many of them as possible during the course, with a view to learning their technique, those he hadn't fought he'd researched with other students who had, and he knew them all by sight. Today's Cazar he'd never seen before in his life. They must've bought one in specially for the exam. What the hell?

His salute was distinctly mechanical (the Cazars never saluted back), and then he started to circle. As he did so, he caught Basso's eye, and saw him wink.

Bastard, he thought (and the Cazar swung at him; he sidestepped back and left, giving ground, maintaining his guard). My bastard uncle made them buy in a brand new Cazar specially for me.

In the event, his anger at Basso's treachery was exactly what he needed. The Cazar was tall, lean and fast, with a dangerous reach; at one point, the tip of his sword came so close to Bassano's cheek he was sure he'd been scratched. But his footwork, though naturally good, was untrained, and Bassano caught him out with a perfectly executed volte in straight time. He rested the point of his sword on the bare patch of skin between the Cazar's

cheek-flap and gorget, and saw him freeze; then he heard his sword clatter on the floor, signifying that he'd conceded the bout. He stepped back, lowered his sword and scowled ferociously at his uncle, who was looking the other way.

He was still thinking about the Cazar during his three-on-one bout, which he concluded in extremely short time with a double disarm and a coup-de-jarnac to the back of the third man's knee. Presumably Basso had done it because—he couldn't really figure out why Basso had done it. Because it would make him angry, and the anger would give him a lift and make him fight above his usual game; well, that was what had happened, so it was a reasonable explanation. Because the First Citizen's nephew must be seen to succeed incontrovertibly, to give the lie to people like the kids in the waiting room, who'd assumed the fights would be fixed. That was rational too. But (the true explanation came to him in the middle of his bout with the dock worker, and made him drop his guard just long enough for his opponent to whack him on the point of his left shoulder with the three-legged stool; two points away, and it hurt) the real reason was, Basso did like a little mischief, now and again. He made laws and invaded countries and adjusted the currency because it'd annoy someone. Well, Bassano decided (and he kicked the dock worker's legs out from under him and touched his sword-point to his jugular vein), it's worked. I'm annoyed.

The next bout was an anticlimax: duel against sword and buckler, one of his best forms, but the show he put up was strictly ordinary—good enough for a pass, but he'd been confident of scoring at least one bonus point. That just left the Sclerian.

The pitchfork (they'd been taught, and it came up again in revision and again in the mocks) is one of the deadliest weapons a man ever has to face. It has the speed, agility and unpredictability of the spear, together with a non-intuitive line (the prongs are on either side of the shaft, not in line with it) and a natural block, in the shape of the base of the head where the two prongs branch off. Added to which, a man armed with a pitchfork is highly unlikely to be a trained fighter, which means all his moves will be innovative, unfamiliar and difficult to read in advance. Students had died or been badly injured in previous years, and failure in this form meant you failed the whole thing.

As the Sclerian came out of the staff door, he examined him carefully. If Basso could make them buy in a new Cazar, could he somehow rig the Sclerian too? Maybe (the thought made him feel slightly ill) he'd rigged it the other way this time, and got them to give him a specially easy opponent, someone who'd been paid to throw the fight. Or possibly the opposite, and this was the All-Scleria Pitchfork Fighting champion.

There was, of course, no way of knowing. In the event, he got through, conceding a slight but painful scratch to his left leg, but eventually making a graceless but efficient disarm to win. That meant he'd passed; and when he glanced back over his shoulder, he saw his uncle grinning like an idiot, the happiest he'd ever seen him. Which was ridiculous, he thought; it's only a fencing degree. But he realised he was grinning too.

Afterwards, a quiet dinner for three at the Severus house—

"Shouldn't you be out celebrating with your classmates?" Basso asked, with his mouth full.

"Should I?"

Basso nodded. "It's traditional. At least, it was in my day. Highest overall score in the exam buys the drinks."

"Leave him alone," Melsuntha said. "If he doesn't want to get horribly drunk in some dreadful bar somewhere..."

Basso shrugged, and helped himself to some more lamb in turmeric and onion sauce. "All I meant was, you shouldn't feel any obligation. If you want to go out on the town, we quite understand."

"No, thanks," Bassano replied with a grin. "Why should I spoil the whole of tomorrow with a hangover, nausea, flatulence and heartburn, with a bunch of people I never liked much anyway, just to conform with a stereotype? Not my idea of a wonderful time. Anyway," he added, "even if I wanted to, I haven't got the energy. A good feed, to take away the taste of that garbage they made us eat in the school, and then at least twelve hours' sleep on a soft mattress. Now that," he added happily, "is celebrating."

"You see?" Melsuntha said. "He's a civilised human being."

"Which is something he has no right to be at his age," Basso replied severely. "It's different for women, they're civilised from the moment they hit puberty. But young men between the ages of seventeen and twenty-two ought to behave badly and make idiots of themselves. It's nature's way."

“Really?” Bassano said. “I expect you can offer some evidence for that.”

“Common sense.” Basso poured himself some more wine. “Take deer. You get a load of young males, far too many for the local grazing to support, and not nearly enough does to go round. So, they fight, and most of them get driven off; and most of them are stupid, so the wolves and the hunters get them, which redresses the balance. Same with humans, except we don’t let nature take its course. We do our best to stop adolescent males getting themselves killed in fights, or smashing themselves up in racing chariots, or falling off bridges while dead drunk. Result, we have far more of them than we need, which is why you can’t walk down Portgate on the morning after May Week without treading in broken glass and vomit.”

“There’s war,” Bassano said seriously. “That gets rid of a lot of them.”

Melsuntha was frowning, but Basso ignored her. “About the only good thing you can say about it, and on balance, I feel there ought to be a better way. Well,” he added, “there is. Do what the Cazars do.”

“The Cazars,” Melsuntha said, “expose girl children on hillsides at birth.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Basso said. “When a boy turns fifteen, he’s sent out to be fostered with a relative or friend of his father, and he doesn’t come back for three years. Treated as cheap labour, not allowed to mix with the family, made to sleep in the barn, up at first light and out with the sheep. You don’t get many stropky seventeen-year-olds in the Cazar Peninsula.”

“I see,” Bassano said. “And you’re thinking of making that the law here in the Republic.”

Basso laughed. “The other thing the Cazars do,” he said, “is send all their surplus manpower abroad: here, or Scleria, or the Eastern Empire. It gets them out of everybody’s hair, they send money home, and most of them don’t come back.”

Melsuntha was glowering at him. “And you approve of that.”

“Good God, no,” Basso said, “it’s barbaric. Efficient and, in the circumstances, thoroughly sensible; there’s barely enough land to support the ones who stay home, so if they didn’t do it that way, the whole lot of them would starve, or wipe each other out in horrendous land wars. The system works, so they stick with it. Hasn’t ever occurred to them to try and find a better system. Doesn’t mean to say there isn’t one.”

Bassano shrugged. "I'm grateful I'm not a Cazar," he said. "It's one of a great many things I'm grateful for. But I'm not quite sure how we got here from the dubious pleasures of excessive drinking."

"We may have wandered from the point a little," Basso conceded. "And it goes without saying that I was talking drivel, just to provoke a discussion."

"I never know with you, Uncle," Bassano said. "You often seem to take pleasure in sabotaging your own best arguments before you make them, just to see if people agree with you."

"He was talking drivel," Melsuntha said. "Trust me."

"There you go." Basso laughed. "Something people never seem to grasp is that you can make out all sorts of bad arguments in favour of a good thing, but that doesn't spoil the good arguments. It's like saying I shouldn't be First Citizen if idiots vote for me."

"Fine," Bassano said. "What good thing are we talking about?"

"Ah," Basso said. "I hadn't got that far yet."

"He was talking drivel," Melsuntha said firmly. "Now he's going to say something sensible. At least, I hope he is. Where I come from, we have yet to learn the art of appreciating drivel for its own sake."

Basso leaned back in his chair and drew the tip of his finger down the inside of her arm. Bassano noted that she shivered, and he looked away. "Something sensible," he said, "by special request. All right, what about this? Bassano, I want you to go away. I want you to leave the City and go and sleep in a barn for three years. Well, more likely a tent, but the principle's the same."

Bassano blinked. "Really? Why on earth would I want to do that?"

Melsuntha, he noticed, had crossed her arms. She wasn't frowning, but he sensed that she didn't agree with whatever Basso had in mind.

"Because," Basso said, "the Vesani Republic is going to go to war with the Mavortine Confederacy. We will, inevitably, win. That'll be the easy part. Staying won will be extremely difficult."

"Staying won," Bassano repeated. "Translation, anyone?"

"Occupying the place," Basso said. "Taking it over and turning it into a province of the Vesani empire. Which doesn't exist," he added quickly, "apart from the little bit we nibbled off Auxentia, which we don't call conquered territory because that wouldn't go down well in the House. Well,

fine. We're going to conquer Mavortis, and we're going to change it out of all recognition. And I want you to help me."

There was a silence; not as awkward as Basso had expected. Then Melsuntha said, "That's not what your uncle and I don't agree about. I think it's a splendid idea."

"You do?"

"Of course," Melsuntha said crisply. "My people aren't fit to govern themselves. Fortunately, no foreigners know about the mineral reserves in the north. Otherwise, we'd have been invaded and conquered years ago, most likely by the Sclerians."

"Not a pleasant experience," Basso put in.

"When you say minerals..." Bassano asked.

"Iron," Melsuntha replied. "And copper, some tin, possibly some silver, quite probably a substantial amount of gold, though I don't know where. But gold jewellery is quite common even in poorer clans, and we certainly don't import gold from anywhere else."

"The iron is the important one, though," Basso said. "We could certainly do with it. Six price rises in four years, and the Auxentines—"

"Can I just stop you there for a moment?" Bassano said quietly. "We need iron and they've got it, so it's perfectly all right for us to invade." He pulled a sad face. "What's the difference between that and what they did to us? After all, gold's just another mineral."

"They did it first," Basso said. "Which is the answer that the House wants to hear," he went on, changing the pitch of his voice. "And I agree, it's not a very good answer, when you stop and think about it. The Mavortines who'll get killed when we invade had nothing to do with the raid on the Treasury. Nor is it a good enough answer to say that if we don't invade them, someone even nastier than us will. The next favourite, we're better than they are, is self-contradictory. No," he went on, lifting his head a little, "it has to make sense, or we'd be wrong to do it."

Bassano looked uncertain. "So it's not about minerals."

"No." Basso paused, as though he was listening to what he'd just said. "The iron and the copper are what's in it for us. The bigger answer is rather complicated."

"I've already heard this," Melsuntha said, getting up. "I'll go and see about some brandy and honey-cakes."

“Did he convince you?” Bassano asked.

“Not to begin with,” Melsuntha said. “So I changed his mind a little.”

“Quite,” Basso said, with a wry grin. “It’s no good making speeches at her. Unlike the noble senators in the House, she has a disconcerting habit of listening to what you say.”

“Good practice for you,” Melsuntha said over her shoulder, and left the room.

When she’d gone, Basso settled himself more comfortably in his chair. He listens to her, Bassano thought, with a degree of amusement, and he has to be careful what he says. “So,” he said. “The complicated stuff.”

Basso nodded. “All right,” he said. “Tell me, what’s the essence of a good deal?”

Bassano thought about that. “You make a profit,” he said.

But Basso shook his head. “A good deal is where both sides make a profit,” he said. “That way, both sides will want to deal with each other again. It’s better to keep the other man happy and make ten per cent ten times than rip the other man off and make thirty per cent once.” He paused to massage his forehead with his fingertips, then went on: “Same, I believe, in international politics. If you’re going to take something from someone, you’d be wise to give them something in exchange. Otherwise, you’re just a pirate, and quite soon you’ll annoy all your neighbours, and they’ll gang up on you and do you harm.”

Bassano frowned. “So you’re going to buy the Mavortines’ iron.”

“In a way,” Basso said. “The essence of a good deal is that you get something you didn’t have before; something you need. What the Mavortines need, rather desperately, is government.”

Bassano laughed. “They might argue with that.”

“Actually, I don’t think so. The country’s on its knees. It’s not like this is how it’s always been. Two hundred years ago, there was plenty of land to support plenty of sheep and cows and not many people. Also, they had a government, of sorts; they had tribes and clans, and there was a kind of a system—pretty relaxed, but none the worse for that. But then some fool came along, about a hundred and seventy years ago, and tried to unite the country into a standard monarchy. He rooted out the tribe and clan structure, so when they got rid of him there was nothing left of it. As a result, you’ve got hundreds of villages, all at daggers drawn with their

neighbours; you've got poor husbandry leading to overgrazing, leading to endemic famine. They need someone to run the place. Just ask Melsuntha—she'll tell you all about it, when you've got a couple of hours."

Bassano realised he was kneading his left middle finger between his right forefinger and thumb, something he only did when he was anxious about something. He made himself stop. "And that makes it all right for us to go in and take the place over?"

Basso nodded. "I believe so," he said. "And after that, we use Mavortine troops to invade Scleria. Then we do the same in Auxentia." He stopped and grinned; Bassano was staring at him. "I imagine you'd like to know why."

"If you wouldn't mind."

Basso dipped his head. "Sooner or later," he said, "there's going to be a war involving us, the Sclerians, the Auxentines and whoever we sign up to do the actual fighting. But we won't be fighting each other. We'll be fighting the Eastern Empire. And," he added, "we'll lose."

Silence, for a while. Then Bassano said: "That seems hard to believe."

"Only because you don't know the facts," Basso replied. "We all grew up thinking the Empire has had its day. We learn about it in history, and we're told it outgrew its strength, crashed and fell apart. Well, that's true, up to a point. They've had a hundred years of miserable civil wars, on and off, with first one general seizing power, then another. But that's changing now. There's a strong family in charge now; a son recently succeeded his father without bloodshed for the first time in eighty years. The whole Empire is so thoroughly militarised that they can't live without war. The whole economy's based round the army, which is huge and very well trained. If they stop fighting each other, they'll start fighting someone else. They want to get back what they lost. The way they see it, everything to the west belongs to them as of right. They won't trade with us, they won't even talk to us; they don't recognise our governments, because they think of us as rebels and upstarts. When they come, if we aren't united and ready for them, they'll roll over us in about ten years."

Bassano looked at him. "You're serious."

"It's happened before," Basso said simply. "Eight hundred years ago, when the Empire was first formed. What they had then, and what they've

still got now, is practically unlimited manpower. And remember Cantacusene.”

“Remind me,” Bassano said helplessly.

Basso laughed. “Six hundred years ago,” he said. “Cantacusene, the Empire’s last great general. He invaded the West and conquered Scleria and half of Auxentia in just five years, before his emperor got nervous about how popular he was with the troops, and called him home and had his eyes put out. Once he’d gone, everybody went back to normal and pretended it hadn’t happened. But it happened all right.” Basso shook his head.

“Cantacusene was a military genius, an exceptional man; but they have a nasty habit of breeding exceptional men out there. Besides, it wouldn’t take a military genius to wipe the floor with us, or the Sclerians. The Auxentines would be a bit harder to knock down, but on their own they wouldn’t stand a chance in the long run.”

“All right,” Bassano said carefully. “Suppose for the sake of argument you’re right. Surely what we need is an alliance, not a Vesani empire.”

“Sure.” Basso shrugged. “And in an ideal world, you’d be able to pick beef puddings from a beef pudding tree. Simple fact: a voluntary alliance won’t happen, and if it did it wouldn’t last five minutes. It’s got to be imposed, by force. I’d rather we did it than either of the other two. They aren’t quite as enlightened as we are.”

Bassano was quiet for a while. Then he said: “And that’s the reason.”

“It’s one of the reasons,” Basso said. “If there’s one thing I should’ve taught you by now, it’s that there’s always more than one reason.”

“All right,” Bassano said. “Give me another.”

Basso yawned. Then he said, “The Vesani aren’t farmers. We make things and sell things. We run banks. We build and sail ships. But there’s thousands of Vesani citizens who don’t know where their next meal’s coming from; thousands more who just get by. If we build up the fleet, plant colonies, there’ll be work for everybody, and for all the foreigners who dream of coming here for a better life. Better still, the system pays for itself. I can’t feed all the hungry families in the City by taxing the rich; they’d have my head on a pike. So we let the foreigners do it; and in return, we sort out the mess they’ve got themselves into, and we stand a chance against the Empire when it decides to take back its birthright.” He looked at the expression on Bassano’s face and laughed. “I know,” he said. “It’s

appalling, isn't it? Wanton aggression, imperialism, bloodshed and untold human misery, and here I am, calmly planning it all. I ask you, Bassano, what sort of a monster have you got for an uncle?"

But Bassano shook his head. "That's not the reason," he said.

"Quite right." Basso nodded. "It's two good reasons, you have to grant me that. But not *the* reason."

"Which is?"

"Simple," Basso replied. "I want you to succeed me as First Citizen."

Once, when Bassano had been walking down Portgate, shortly after dark, a smartly dressed young man walking the other way had stepped out in front of him, slapped him across the face, and walked off. For quite some time, he was too confused to think, let alone register the pain of the slap. Later, he'd rationalised that the man was drunk or crazy, that it had actually happened, and it meant absolutely nothing. At the time, though, he'd had extreme difficulty believing in it, as though he'd been called upon to believe in a Cazar tribal god.

"You're serious," he said.

"Well, of course." Basso seemed surprised by his reaction. "It's the logical step. I'm limited by law to three terms of office. I intend to serve four—there'll be a crisis in the third year of my third term; they'll insist that I stand again to see the Republic through, and they'll pass a special dispensation. I'll protest like crazy, until they make me realise I have no choice. Four threes are twelve: in twelve years, you'll take over from me. It'll have to be you. They won't accept anybody else."

"You'll see to that."

"Of course," Basso said, as if thanking a waiter for bringing his soup. "In twelve years' time, we'll be fighting in Auxentia, and the Empire will be a year away from the Sclerian border. The fleet will be the biggest employer in the Republic, the public revenues will be three times what they are today, and taxes will be lower in real terms. I'll be getting the Bank ready to hand over to the twins. I plan to retire altogether when I'm sixty. You'll serve four terms and beat the Empire. You'll have to make your own mind up about what you want to do after that. I doubt I'll be around."

Bassano couldn't help laughing. "You've decided which day you'll die on, then."

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Basso said with a grin. “But I don’t suppose I’ll last very long after I give up the Bank. I’ll have done everything I want by then, and living just for the sake of it never struck me as a worthwhile activity.”

“Uncle.” Bassano tried to find some words, but it was like catching elvers. “What makes you think I’d even want to...?”

“It’s the only thing for you,” Basso said quietly. “Because you’re my nephew, which entitles you to aim high. Because you’ve got a brilliant mind...”

Bassano shook his head. “You’re giving me reasons again,” he said. “I’ve had it up to here with you and your reasons. Tell me straight, just for once. Why would you want to do this?”

For a moment Basso looked as if he was going to refuse. Then he said; “I owe it to your mother.”

Bassano opened his mouth, closed it again, and said, “Oh.”

“I killed her husband,” Basso said, “and ruined her life. She won’t let me even try and make it up to her. So I’ve got to make it good through you.”

Bassano closed his eyes for a moment. “Yes,” he said, “I can understand you thinking like that. And...”

“Yes?”

“Mother would like that,” he said heavily, because it was true. “She’d be pleased that I was following in my grandfather’s footsteps. Not yours, of course. I think she’ll persuade herself that you never existed.”

Something in the way Basso’s face didn’t move when he said that. “Well, then,” Basso said. “There’s your reason.”

Bassano breathed out, something he’d neglected to do. “Uncle,” he said. “When I wanted to join the Bank, you wouldn’t let me. You said you didn’t want me to turn into you, or something like that. But now you want me to —”

“It’s not the same thing.” Basso was shaking his head vehemently. “You’re nothing like me, not in the things that matter. And when you’re First Citizen, you won’t do the job the way I’ll have done it. You’ll be completely different. Which is why I’ve planned it this way. It’ll take a man like me to build the empire. It’ll need someone like you to make it work.”

Bassano sighed. “More reasons.”

“Be quiet a minute and listen,” Basso said urgently. “I meant what I said. Building an empire calls for a bastard like me: an unprincipled, amoral, calculating butcher who’ll run the world like a bank. If it’s going to survive and actually mean anything, it’ll need someone like you: someone with brains, who cares deeply about right and wrong, and who never wanted the job to begin with. A better man, in every respect; but a better man couldn’t do what I’ve got to.”

Bassano looked at him, trying to see behind his soft, bright eyes. “Or else the Eastern Empire will roll right over us.”

“Yes,” Basso said, and his grin was entirely humourless, “but that’s not the reason. Paying my debt to your mother isn’t the reason. It’s because it’s inevitable. By that stage, there will be no other possible candidate; and I’m not talking about the opinions of the voters. There has to be a clear succession, from me to my appointed heir, or else the whole thing’ll come apart. The twins...” He sighed. “They’re good boys, and I’ve treated them appallingly badly. It’s not their fault, any of it, but I can’t forgive them for having that woman as their mother. I’m not even sure I’m their father. They can have the Bank—a third each, and you’ll have the other third, by right; it’s what your mother should have had, so the twins will understand. They’re devoted to you, of course. It’s the only thing we have in common.”

The thought that he was to inherit a third of the Charity & Social Justice, an idea that had never even crossed his mind as a wild fantasy before, left Bassano gasping for breath. Before he could say anything, Basso went on: “You’ll need money, to live on, and for politics. It makes it so much easier when the Treasury runs out of money; you just say, ‘don’t worry, I’ll pay for that’, and then you don’t have to bother with cutting deals with the Optimates. You’ll be able to be your own man, in everything. I believe in you, Bassano. In fact, you’re about the only thing I believe in, apart from luck. I have faith that you’ll make the world a better place.” He grinned unexpectedly. “Not exactly my first priority. It’s something I tend to do by accident. You’ll do it on purpose.”

Bassano took a deep breath. “You overestimate me,” he said. “What’ve I ever done to make you think I’m the saviour of the world?”

“You’re not,” Basso said. “Not yet. That’s why you’ve got to go to Mavortis. By the time you’ve finished there, you’ll have grown into the man I take you for.” He looked away, took a walnut from the bowl on the

table to his left, squeezed it in his right hand till it cracked. "You can refuse, of course. Entirely up to you."

Bassano burst out laughing. "I can refuse," he said. "Oh, right. You're going to melt down the world and recast it to suit me, but I can just say, thanks but no thanks, and that'll be that."

"That's right," Basso said, picking bits of nut out of the handful of crushed shell. "I'm quite certain you won't, but you do have that option. You don't have to decide here and now," he went on. "Think about it, if you like. There's no mad panic."

"And if I say no?"

Basso shrugged. "Then we'll have to think up something else instead," he replied. "But it won't be nearly as good."

"I think..." Bassano stopped, then made a hopeless gesture. "For pity's sake, Uncle," he said. "An hour ago, I was thrilled to bits and deeply happy just because I'd passed some stupid fencing test. Now you tell me I'm going to be the Emperor of the West. You really know how to screw up a person's evening."

"Here's a hint for you," Basso replied, busy sorting bits of nut from shell splinters. "If you hadn't passed the exam, I wouldn't have made you this offer."

"What's that supposed to...?"

"If you hadn't increased production at the Mint by a third and cut costs by ten per cent, I wouldn't have thought up the idea," Basso went on. "Same goes for your grades at the Studium."

Bassano leaned forward, hunching his thin shoulders. "Do I get Aelius?" he asked.

"Of course," Basso replied. "I want you to learn from him, the way I learned from Antigonus. You'll have other advisers, of course. I don't expect you to do anything except watch and learn for the first year. After that—well, you'll take it at your own pace. I have every—"

"Aelius," Bassano interrupted. "Have you discussed this with him? What does he think about it?"

"I haven't told him yet," Basso replied.

"About me?"

"Any of it." Basso cupped his hands and sucked down the last of the nut fragments. "No point getting him involved until you've agreed. But he'll be

all right. He likes you.”

“He’s only met me a couple of times,” Bassano said. “At functions, for a few minutes.”

“True,” Basso replied. “But I’ve told him about you.”

“I’d have thought I was exactly the type he’d have no time for.”

“On the contrary,” Basso said. “He’s got far more issues with me, but we get along just fine.” Basso made a show of dusting off his hands, then drank some wine. “Aelius and Antigonus are the two people I’ve relied on to get where I am. He’ll take care of you, provided you listen to him. Which you will.”

Bassano looked down at his hands, as if he’d only just noticed he had them. “You really think I can do this.”

“If you want to do it, yes,” Basso said. “If your heart’s not in it, say so and we’ll forget the whole thing. You can be a lawyer or an art historian instead.”

Bassano closed his eyes and laughed. “You really think...”

“Yes.” Basso interlaced his fingers. “One thing I’m never wrong about is people. I’m sure you’d make a really fine lawyer or an exceptional art historian, but I believe you’ll enjoy this a whole lot more.”

“Enjoy,” Bassano repeated, as though the word was meaningless. “What’s that got to do with it?”

“Everything,” Basso said. “In that respect, I do believe you are a bit like me. Really,” he added, “do you think I’d be doing this job if it wasn’t a whole load of fun?”

It was probably the last thing he’d have predicted his uncle to say, but now that he’d heard it, he decided it was probably true. “Fun,” he repeated.

“The best there is,” Basso said. “But so far, I’ve barely scratched the surface. Let’s see, what exactly have I *done* since I got this job?” He started counting on his fingers. “The Auxentine war: well, that was really unfinished business left over from the previous regime. It turned out all right, but it’s the stuff of footnotes. The citizenship law: that was fun, but it was only just a start. Refining the currency, I enjoyed that. The plague was a mess—we all tried really hard to do something intelligent, but in the end we might as well not have bothered. The Treasury raid was mostly Aelius, so the only real pleasure I got out of that was proving I’d chosen the right man. It’s been a pretty hectic year, and all I’ve really done is react and cope.

I like it so much more when I'm making the running." Basso yawned. "You're going to say, my idea of fun isn't the same as yours. Quite true. That's why you'll be better at this job than me. Every day when I turn up for work, there's this nagging feeling at the back of my mind that sooner or later I'm going to get found out; someone's going to realise that I'm not fit to be in charge of the Vesani Republic, and then I'll be thrown out into the street. I feel like a boy who's stolen his father's horse. You won't be like that. In many ways you're a whole lot more grown up than me."

Bassano sighed, long and deep. "I'm going to have to think about it," he said. "Is that all right? Really?"

"Of course," Basso said. "Now, if you'd clapped your hands together and said, 'that's fantastic, when can I start?' I'd have been really worried."

Bassano looked at him. "And the real reason? Come on, you can tell me."

For a long time, Basso sat very still and looked at him. Then he said, "The real reason?"

"The real reason."

"Simple." Basso put on a solemn face, which made Bassano want to laugh. "To avoid a catastrophic drain on the public finances, the Bank will be investing heavily in all this. In return for five million nomismata, we get a quarter share of all revenues, in perpetuity. We stand to make an enormous sum of money, and since Antigonus is too old to go, you're the only one I'd trust not to rip us off." He smiled. "I'd have thought you'd have worked that one out for yourself."

Bassano shook his head. "That's *a* reason," he said.

"All right." Basso sighed. "The reason is, to annoy your mother. Make her son the most powerful man in the world, whether she likes it or not. What better reason could you ask for?"

Bassano nodded. "That's a reason," he said. "Coming from you, I'll accept that."

"And you'll do it?"

At that moment, Melsuntha came back in with the brandy and the honey-cakes.

She arrived late one evening, just as the clerks were putting out the lamps and getting ready to leave. They sent for the duty guard sergeant, who wasn't even aware that the First Citizen had a sister. She demanded to speak to his superior; he went away and came back with the only officer still in the building, a young Cazar lieutenant who ran the Pay Office. He knew the First Citizen had a sister, and that they didn't get on. He sent a clerk to ask Basso if he wanted to see her.

"What?" he said, looking up from his work.

"Says she's your sister, sir," the lieutenant said nervously. It was the first time he'd been in the great man's presence, and legends about what happened to officers who disturbed Him when he was working were many and exaggerated.

"Oh." Basso laid down his pen. He looked mildly stunned. "Send her up. No, just a moment. Give me a few minutes, then show her into the cabinet room. Get someone to light some lamps, and a fire."

The cabinet room had been gorgeously decorated by Basso's father; it was one of his few lasting achievements. The walls were covered with a fresco of Trade and Liberty presenting gold crowns to the personified Vesani people; the buxom, slightly stout woman who represented the Republic was supposed to be either the painter's wife or the First Citizen's mistress (some historians later claimed that she was both). The table, cut from a single board of Auxentine walnut, had been taken from an unarmed Auxentine merchant ship as reparations for the expulsion of some minor Vesani diplomat. The chairs had been borrowed from the Studium, the unwanted gift of a rich and tiresome benefactor two hundred years earlier; they were gilded and painted, in the late Rationalist style. The ceiling, which Basso's father hadn't got around to altering, was gilded mosaic, left over from when the room was the Chancellor's private chapel. Basso had made them remove the gilt-ivory statue of Prosperity that his father had borrowed from the Sutlers' Guild; he hadn't given it back to the Sutlers, and it was crated up somewhere in the basement, along with the rest of the junk.

"Bassano told me," she said, before he could open his mouth.

"Fine," Basso said. "I thought he probably would."

She sat down, perching on the edge of one of the Studium chairs. She was thinner than when he'd seen her last, and her hair was going grey at the

sides, something he found hard to accept. She looked like a stallholder in the market.

“I won’t allow it.”

“Oh for pity’s sake,” Basso said wearily. “Why ever not?”

“I know why you’re doing it,” she said. “You’re trying to steal him from me.”

Basso nodded. “Obviously,” he said. “He’s all I’ve got.”

“He’s all I’ve got,” she replied. “And we can’t both have him.”

Basso met her glare. It took some doing. “Then surely it’s up to him to choose between us.”

“No.” She said it quietly. When you’re really angry, you tend not to shout. “You have more to offer. But I won’t allow it.”

“Think about it,” Basso said, trying to keep his voice even. “It’s the best opportunity he could ever have. He’ll be a magnificent First Citizen, and it’ll give him tremendous satisfaction. Don’t you want him to be happy?”

“Under other circumstances, of course.”

Basso closed his eyes. “You mean, you hate me more than you love your son.”

She clicked her tongue—a sharp but everyday rebuke. “If you insist on putting it in those terms.”

Basso opened his eyes again and looked at her. “That’s dreadful,” he said. “You ought to think about that.”

“It’s not what I’d have chosen,” she replied. “And if it’s as bad as that, you’re to blame. This whole thing is entirely your fault. You murdered my husband. If you had a shred of decency, you’d have left me my son.”

“Fine.” Basso realised he couldn’t be doing with this discussion. “You won’t allow it. What do you propose doing about it?”

Her face was closed right down. “I’m going to file charges against you,” she said. “For Palo’s murder.”

Later, he was quite proud of the way he let the shock break over him. “I think you’ll find you’ve left it too long,” he said, crisp and businesslike.

“There’s a limitation period of fifteen years—”

“Not for murder,” she replied, quick and precise, like someone dead-heading a rose. “Really, Basso, you of all people ought to know the law. Murder, treason and gross incompetence in public office have no limitation period. I can bring charges whenever I like.”

Basso nodded. "Quite right," he said. "You don't think that'd be something of an overreaction, bearing in mind that all I'm trying to do is give your son the best possible start in life?"

"It's a question of motives," she replied. "Like I just said, you took away my husband. I won't let you have my son as well."

Basso nodded, as if he could see the sense in that. "In that case," he said, "you go ahead. In fact, I'd like that. I must say, I never thought you'd actually do it, but I won't pretend it hasn't been a worry at the back of my mind over the years. I'd be pleased to get rid of that particular threat. So yes, go ahead." He paused, to see if she'd react, then went on: "Of course, I could have the charges quashed just by signing a bit of paper. The Optimates are in no position to make a fuss about it, because I'm backing their war—something they never expected me to do, of course, which is probably why I did it. While the war's still in hand, they can't really make trouble for me about anything."

"You're very sure about that," she said, but she was frightened.

"Even if they tried to," Basso went on, "I've got a two-to-one majority in the House and nobody on my side wants me to fall—a pretty unusual state of affairs, I grant you, but if you don't believe me, ask around. Too many people owe me money. Or," he went on, not allowing her a chance, "I could let the charges go ahead. There isn't a hope in hell that any jury would convict me of anything right now. I could refuse to offer a defence, and they'd still acquit. Or I could defend the action, pointing out it was self-defence—which is true, of course—and asking the jury to consider your motives in bringing the charges after such a long time. I could make it impossible for you to stay in this city. You'd have crowds outside your house throwing rocks through your windows."

She looked at him. "Is that what you want?"

"No, of course not," he said angrily, then checked himself and went on: "As you know, once someone's been acquitted of a charge, it can't be brought again. So, if you try anything now, that'll be it. Your last hold over me will be gone for ever. I think I'd like that."

She didn't say anything, and the look on her face broke his heart. He managed to draw breath, and said, "All I want to do is give Bassano a chance to be really happy. He's one of those very rare people who only get pleasure out of doing the right thing. There's not a trace of selfishness in

him; do you know how extraordinary that makes him? If he spends his life ambling along, doing no harm and no good, he'll be utterly wretched by the time he's my age. He needs this opportunity. I've done it all just for him. For God's sake, you're his mother, can't you see I'm right?"

"I'm not disputing that," she said. "But I can't let you win. I have to stop you winning, no matter what it costs. And everything bad that happens as a result is your fault."

He didn't reply, or move. He was just waiting for her to go.

"I shall consult my lawyers," she said (he thought: what a formal way of putting it, like a business letter). "I believe I stand a good chance of winning, or at least of ruining you."

She stood up. He stayed where he was. "Will you tell Bassano what you've got in mind?"

"Of course," she said. "I shall tell him that unless he refuses your offer, I shall press the charges. If he refuses, I shall let you go." A spurt of anger crossed her face; she froze it. "He's devoted to you, so of course he'll refuse the offer, to save you. I shall then insist that he comes home, and never has any contact with you ever again. I believe that takes care of everything."

She left the room, and Basso couldn't be bothered to send a clerk after her, to show her the way out. Let her spend the night roaming the corridors.

For a long time, he sat perfectly still, staring at the lamp in front of him, until it guttered and went out.

Eleven

Antigonus died in his sleep three days before the first anniversary of Basso's election victory. When Basso came to see the body, he was amazed at the way the old man had lived. He'd never been in Antigonus' private chambers before; nor, he realised, did he have any strong preconceptions about what they would be like. He knew Antigonus had simple but refined tastes and wasn't short of money; he was always plainly but respectably dressed, his hair always trimmed in the same style to a constant length, so you'd be forgiven for forming the impression that it never grew at all, his fingernails immaculately cut and shaped, his clothes freshly laundered and pressed, his teeth (the full set, in spite of his age) impeccably white and even.

He had lived, it turned out, in three rooms just north of the docks: a dressing room, where all his clothes were hung on racks, orderly as a shop; a bathroom, containing a cheap copper bath, a very old polished-steel mirror, a table for razors, strigils and soap, and a chamber pot, slightly cracked; and a bedroom, containing a bed. Antigonus' servant, who had been with him for thirty years and looked like he was older than his master, had washed and shaved him, looked after his clothes and brought him his meal every evening: a bowl of soup and half a loaf of hard barley bread from the dockers' canteen at the bottom of the street. Always the same, the servant said, and he insisted on the two-day-old bread, stale but still edible, and half-price. When he came home from work, the servant went on, Antigonus immediately changed out of his good clothes and put on a long woollen tunic, very old and covered in darned patches, which he'd once

said had come from his own country. He would sit on his bed to eat his soup and bread; then the lamp would be put out, to save oil, and Antigonus would lie in the dark till morning. He slept badly, especially in the last year, when the pain of his illness kept him awake. The servant, who slept on the dressing-room floor, handed Basso a folded yellow document, Antigonus' will, dated five years earlier. In it, Antigonus had left Basso everything, with the proviso that if he should die before his planned return to his home village, his body should be buried with the minimum of expense (there were detailed instructions on how to save money at every stage of the process) in the common graveyard on Corvis Island. All his savings were held at the Bank.

Although he'd been sorely tempted over the years, Basso had never looked to see how much money Antigonus had. It came to just over a million nomismata, the fifth-largest estate since records began. Basso followed the funeral instructions to the letter. He gave the servant twenty thousand nomismata, pretending that it had been a legacy from his master. The old man was so shocked that Basso thought he was going to die on the spot. Later, he heard that he'd given two-thirds of the money to the Studium, to endow a perpetual chantry for Antigonus' soul.

When he went to Antigonus' office, he found everything in perfect order, as he'd expected. He also found a book, in the old man's own handwriting, addressed to himself. It proved to be a detailed analysis of every aspect of the Bank's business, setting out its strengths and weaknesses, with copious suggestions and recommendations. At the end, Antigonus had written:

I have served you, my lord Bassianus Arcadius Honorius Severus, to the best of my ability. The Bank has been my life's work, and I am satisfied that, when you read this, you will find it in good order. My service has been involuntary; it was duty, not choice. I served your father with just as much effort and application, although I never could stand the man; I thought him foolish and reckless, his only redeeming feature being luck. Duty, however, is sacred. You, on the other hand, I have always loved as though you were my own son. The only joy in my life has been to see your triumphs. The only sorrow worth mentioning has been to see how little comfort your success has brought you. Wise as I am (and I know of no one wiser, except you, of

course), I have no suggestions to make as to how you may be happy. I fear that will not be possible. I hope I am wrong.

Goodbye, my lord Bassianus, Basso, my beloved master, my friend. My only regret is that I can serve you no longer. Forgive me.

Your servant,

Antigonus Poliorcetes (formerly Genseric son of Dedric of Oesey, of the White Reed clan of the Jazygite nation)

Tragazes succeeded Antigonus as chief cashier of the Bank. In turn, Basso gave his job to a young clerk from the counting office, by the name of Lascaris. Both appointments had been written down in Antigonus' book; Lascaris, he'd said, was bright, imaginative but cautious, with a good head for detail and an infinite capacity for work. At the same time (again on Antigonus' recommendation) he promoted the twins to be joint Controllers, and assigned them both to the foreign exchange division. They were delighted and thanked him, profusely and (as far as he could judge) sincerely. He didn't tell them that he was only obeying orders, and wouldn't have done any such thing if left to himself.

The second attempt on his life was a relatively quiet affair, although it nearly succeeded. As he said to Sentio at the time, "Someone tried to kill me and I didn't even notice."

As the weather grew warmer, he took to working at the Severus house in the small herb garden rather than his office. In his grandfather's day it had been a courtyard, a place where the grooms could comb and tack up the horses. Grandfather had built new stables on a piece of land he bought from the government, adjoining the west side of the house. He knocked down the old stables and built a cloister (very much the fashion at that time), and dug up the paved yard, built a wall round it and planted it with pear trees and herbaceous borders. In the afternoons, the house shaded the garden and blocked out the wind. Basso's father had had a fountain put in (they'd had to dig up the main water pipe, which ran directly under the house—weeks of chaos and ruinous expense); Basso's only contribution had been to train espaliered fig trees up the back wall, install a retractable canvas awning for morning shade, and knock a doorway through the east wall to give access to

the narrow alley behind it. He called it the sally-port, and often used it when he wanted to slip out of the house without anybody knowing.

On the day in question, he was working out complicated calculations on a portable chequerboard: costings for the Mavortine expedition, though the future of the project was still in doubt. He hadn't heard from Bassano since his sister's visit. There had been questions in the House, but he'd stalled, saying that the enterprise was too important to be rushed through. The sums of money involved were so large that, after a while, he found he'd run out of counters. As he stood up, to go into the house for the spare box, he noticed something that most definitely hadn't been there a few minutes ago, when he'd last looked up. There was an arrow, stuck in the wooden pillar that supported the canvas awning.

He looked at it for several seconds, bewildered by the incongruity. For one thing, it was an unusual arrow: too short to have been shot from a bow, rather on the long side for a crossbow bolt, and extremely thick, nearly half an inch in diameter. It had gone in deep—all he could see of the head was the socket and the points of the barbs, and it had split the pillar down the grain.

It was only a noise from the alley (inconsequential, as it turned out) that made him think about the implications. If it hadn't been there before, it must have arrived recently, while he'd been sitting in the garden, not very far away. Someone had shot it at him.

As soon as the thought entered his mind, he made a dive for the cloister door; stumbled over his own feet, nearly fell on his face, grabbed the door to pull himself upright, fumbled it open, collapsed through it, slammed it shut and shot home both the bolts. He ran into the house and yelled, "Hello?" (it was all he could think of to say), repeating it several times before a flustered-looking clerk came out of the library.

"There's been an attack," he said.

Understandably, the clerk looked confused. "Sir?"

"I was in the small garden. Someone shot an arrow at me." He realised he was gabbling, and pulled himself together. "I want you to find the guard sergeant and tell him to send a runner to General Aelius. I want the house and gardens searched."

It was, of course, a complete waste of time, achieving nothing further than throwing the entire household into panic for the rest of the day. As

Aelius explained, slowly and patiently, as to an imbecile, it was extremely unlikely that the assassin had ever been on the premises at all.

“The arrow tells us that,” he said. It was lying on the table in the counting room (a good-sized room with no windows). “Just as well you noticed it when you did, really.”

“Meaning?”

“It’s an artillery bolt,” Aelius explained. “From a scorpion; that’s a light field catapult. Usually they’re mounted on carriages and used to lay down a barrage just before the start of a battle, though we’ve started using them on ships, to pick men off the rigging. They’re extremely accurate out to two hundred and fifty yards.”

Basso tried to organise the geography of the neighbourhood in his mind, but couldn’t. Fortunately, Aelius had brought a map. “Most likely,” he said, spreading the map out on the table, “they set it up in the tower of the Great Light Temple. It’s the only building within shot that’s tall enough to see into your garden.”

Basso frowned. “That’s unlikely,” he said. “How the hell could they have got something like that up the stairs without anybody noticing?”

Aelius smiled grimly. “In pieces, I imagine,” he said. “Must’ve broken it right down and rebuilt it up in the tower. Otherwise, you’d need a crane. My guess is,” he went on, “they loosed off the shot just before you got up. It takes a good minute to crank the thing up again. By the time they’d reloaded, you were on your feet and walking about. Scorpions are accurate, but they’re not up to picking off a moving target at long range. They must’ve cursed you for not holding still.”

Basso’s eyes widened. “It seems a bit hard to believe,” he said. “That’s a hell of a long way.”

“It can be done,” Aelius replied. “Seen it myself. I saw a general shot off his horse at well over two hundred yards once. In fact,” he went on, leaning over the plan and laying a ruler across it, “they didn’t miss by all that much, look. There’s the fountain, so you’d have been sitting there—the table was just under the awning, as I remember, so your chair would’ve been...” He laid his fingernail on the edge of the ruler. “I’m surprised you didn’t hear it go past,” he said. “It’s a sort of swishing sound; you can actually hear it rotating in flight.”

Basso didn't ask how Aelius came to know that. "I don't remember hearing anything," he said.

"You were lucky," Aelius replied. "If you'd stayed put an extra minute, there's a fair chance they'd have had you with the second shot."

Basso turned away, so he couldn't see the bolt. He had an irrational feeling that it might wake up and come after him again. "Even if they did take it to bits," he said quietly, "they couldn't have got the bits up into the tower without someone noticing. There's always half a dozen priests in the main hall, not to mention the novices and the cleaning staff."

"That's right," Aelius said. "They couldn't, could they?"

He had the priests arrested. They angrily pleaded benefit of clergy, a concept with which the Cazar guardsmen sent to round them up claimed not to be familiar. Not all of Aelius' distant relatives had gone home after the recovery of the money. One of the priests resisted arrest, which made it all much simpler.

Some time later, one of the priests confessed; a genuine confession, rather than the I'll-say-anything-if-you'll-stop-hitting-me kind, in Aelius' professional opinion, though of course it wouldn't be admissible in evidence. All the priest knew was that he and his colleagues had been told to stay out of temple that day. Where had the order come from? The deacon, presumably, though he couldn't actually remember how he'd heard it. Someone had told him; that was how orders were passed along. If someone told you something, you assumed it was true. Why wouldn't you?

The deacon denied giving any such order. Aelius, who'd taken the trouble to look up benefit of clergy in the book, and who therefore knew that unless he could make his charges stick he was in deep trouble, handled the deacon's interrogation personally. When the deacon quoted the law at him (word-perfect; almost as if he'd recently read up on the statutes himself), Aelius replied that the law didn't apply in a treason investigation. That was a lie, but the deacon clearly wasn't sure. Aelius then had him taken down into the stores, where they kept a lot of broken machinery; harmless enough, bits of old pump mechanism mostly, but the deacon was no engineer. He looked at the ratchets and gearwheels and drive chains, and

admitted that yes, he'd given the order. Who'd told him to do it? The prior of the Studium.

"This is getting out of hand," Basso said, when Aelius reported to him. "What did you find in the tower, by the way?"

"This." Aelius opened his hand; on his palm lay a hexagonal nut, about the size of a thumbnail. "It's the capstan axis pin retaining nut off a late-model scorpion. It's a special thread," he added, when Basso looked at him. "One they only use in the armoury. Machine-cut, so it can't be a home-made copy. Also, there's places in the stonework where the stone's been chipped. When a scorpion goes off, the carriage jerks sharply backwards. There's not much room up in the tower. The back end of the trail fittings would've gouged into the back wall."

Basso sat down. "Thanks," he said. "I'm grateful to you for all your hard work. Now I'd like you to send the priests home and close down the investigation. I'll deal with it from here."

He knew the look that appeared on Aelius' face; he tended to think of it as his Oh-for-crying-out-loud expression. As far as he knew, Aelius didn't pull it for anybody else. "Bassianus, we're talking about someone trying to kill you. I really think—"

"What did you just call me?"

Aelius pulled up short. "Bassianus," he said. "Sorry, was that wrong? Only..."

Basso smiled. "No, nothing wrong," he said. "It's just, I don't think you've ever called me by name before, in all the time we've known each other. I'm trying to remember, but I'm pretty sure."

Aelius frowned. "I don't know," he said.

"Nor me. But I have an idea you've always found a way not to—presumably because you don't know what to call me, so you've cleverly ducked the issue. Bassianus is fine, by the way, though it's rather a mouthful. Call me Basso."

Aelius looked at him. "Is that all right?"

"Don't see why not," Basso said. "After all, you're the man I trust most in the world, now that Antigonus has gone. When I think of all the rubbish that gets to call me by my name, I guess it's all right if you do too." He grinned, and Aelius laughed, something he didn't do often; he had a strangely high-pitched laugh, a bit like a heron calling. "And it's all right

about the investigation,” Basso went on, “believe me, it is. I’m pretty sure I know who’s behind it, and I can put a stop to it without the need for a fuss. Talking of which, I don’t suppose we can hush this thing up, but try and keep a lid on the details. If they ask you, yes there was an attempt on my life, all been taken care of, state security prevents you saying more. That sort of thing.”

Aelius nodded. “We all know what to say by now,” he said. “And you’re sure about this? There’s nothing more I can do?”

“Quite sure,” Basso said.

It was perfectly normal for the First Citizen to ask the Patriarch of the Studium for a private audience, particularly when the government was about to embark on a controversial initiative or go to war. In fact, it was expected; the people liked to think that the Invincible Sun had been consulted (by proxy) and had given his approval.

“I need your help,” Basso said, when they were alone together. “Someone tried to kill me the other day.”

The Patriarch’s face was a study in horror. “How appalling,” he said. “That the First Citizen of the Vesani Republic should be attacked, with murderous intent, in his own house. These Mavortines—”

“We don’t think it was them,” Basso interrupted gently. “Actually, we know precisely who it was.”

“Thank heaven for that,” the Patriarch said fervently. “And has an arrest been made?”

“Not yet,” Basso replied. “In fact, that’s where you can help me. I need you to waive benefit of clergy so I can interview a priest.”

The Patriarch looked very grave. “That would be difficult,” he said. “What crime do you think the priest has committed?”

“That’s the thing,” Basso replied. “We won’t know until we ask him. He could have been deeply involved, or he could just have been an innocent dupe. But without his evidence, I don’t see how we can possibly get a conviction. He’s the only link, you see, between the men who actually carried out the attack and the person who was really behind it.”

The Patriarch turned his head away; a man wrestling with his conscience. “I would have to know who this priest is.”

“Oh, I can tell you that,” Basso replied. “It’s you.”

There was a very long silence, during which Basso kept perfectly still, his eyes fixed on the Patriarch, who stared back at him. Like two cats on a wall, Basso later said, though without the hissing.

“Alternatively,” Basso said at last, “we could have you impeached and removed from office, in which case benefit wouldn’t apply and we could interrogate you as much as we like. Of course, we’d need a priest of archepiscopal rank to lay a formal complaint, but apparently that won’t be a problem. If I may say so, that’s one of the great drawbacks about appointments for life. When someone’s got the top job, the only hope for his rivals is to get rid of him, one way or another. I have to say, I’m surprised how many rivals you have. I’ve always thought you’ve done a splendid job, but it seems a great many of your peers would disagree.”

The Patriarch lowered his chin a little. “There are no grounds for an impeachment,” he said quietly. “The only possible charges...”

Basso nodded. “Gross incompetence, corruption or doctrinal error,” he said. “Naturally, gross incompetence is out of the question. I wouldn’t want to try corruption; I don’t think your colleagues really want to go there, if you see what I mean. Doctrinal error, on the other hand, would appear to be a distinct possibility. I’m not really up on that sort of thing, I’m ashamed to say, but I know a great many very intelligent men who are. There would have to be an ecumenical council, of course. We’re quietly confident we could get the necessary seventeen votes, and that’s without offering any incentives.”

The Patriarch shivered. “What are the alternatives?” he said softly.

“I think we’ve already covered that,” Basso said pleasantly. “Waive benefit and let me ask you a few simple questions. Off the record, if you like. I just want to know the answers.” He shook his head sadly. “It’s a great shame we’ve had to be unpleasant about it, but I guess you had to be made to believe how serious I am about this.”

The Patriarch breathed out long and slow. “You may ask your questions,” he said.

“Splendid.” Basso leaned back a little in his chair. “All right,” he said. “First, who’s your inside man in the armoury? The one who got you the scorpion.”

The Patriarch hesitated, then said: "I don't know the man's name, of course, but I believe he's a clerk in the supply department. My understanding is that the machine was in fact built up out of spare parts, smuggled out of the building over a long period of time. I gather that the individual in question has quite an inventory of such things for sale."

Basso nodded. "Thank you," he said warmly. "That's a great help. Presumably, he'll be able to tell us who he dealt with, unless you'd care to save us the trouble."

The Patriarch mentioned a name. Basso managed not to react. "And he would have been the chief intermediary," he said. "Between yourself and the person behind the attack."

"One of several," the Patriarch replied. "Do you want all the names?"

Basso shook his head. "I'm not interested," he said. "You know as well as I do that I'm not going to take any action, not unless I have to."

"Indeed." The Patriarch's face didn't change, but Basso noticed that the hand gripping the arm of the patriarchal chair had tightened its grip. "That was our assumption," he said. "I must ask your forgiveness. It was very wrong and foolish—"

But Basso held up his hand. "Not official action, at any rate," he replied. "Unofficially, there's a great deal I'm minded to do, if I can be bothered. I've got twelve distinguished theologians going through every word you've written over the last forty years, for instance. I'm rather looking forward to reading their report, though I don't suppose it'll make a great deal of sense to me. Still, I'm not the one they need to convince. Of course, it depends how patient I can bring myself to be. Not one of my outstanding virtues, I'm afraid." He stood up and walked over to the table in the corner, on which a number of fine crystal decanters were arranged. "May I?" he said, and poured himself a small brandy. "Would you like anything?"

The Patriarch was looking at the decanter in Basso's hand, and at his other hand, poised over the decanter's neck, forefinger and thumb pinched tight together. It was a somewhat melodramatic gesture, but Basso had no great opinion of the Patriarch's capacity for subtlety. "Of course, you could employ a taster," Basso said. "Probably a wise precaution, in fact, though you may have a little difficulty explaining to your colleagues. Though personally, I don't put much stock in food-tasters. A lot of poisons work slowly, they tell me, not that I'm any sort of expert. Same goes for

bodyguards and all that sort of thing. You can't rely on them, believe me. You're protected to a certain extent from the lone maniac with a knife, and that's about it." He put the decanter down, and rolled the brandy round the bottom of the glass. "I've come to the conclusion that the only reliable way to keep from getting murdered is not to have any enemies. What do you think? Is that a realistic objective?"

The Patriarch had flattened himself against the back of his chair, like a man about to have a tooth pulled. "I can think of only one person who could truly be described as your enemy," he said. "Otherwise, I don't believe you have much to worry about."

Basso smiled. "Thank you," he said. "You've set my mind at rest." He put the glass down, and the Patriarch couldn't help noticing he hadn't drunk any of it. "Do take care of yourself," he said. "Like I said just now, I think you're doing a wonderful job. I can't really think of anybody who could do it nearly as well."

The doctor was an Auxentine, though it was fairly obvious he hadn't been home in quite a while. His clothes were expensive and colourful, his shoes perhaps the most impressive objects Basso had ever seen (though perhaps the jewelled rood screen in the Studium temple equalled them, in value of materials if not in aesthetic excellence). Basso was surprised to find that he was quite young. He looked like a child who's been in the dressing-up box.

"I've found a cure for the plague," the doctor said.

"Is that right?" Basso let his eyes feast on the shoes one more time, then sat down. "That's quite an accomplishment," he said.

"Yes," the doctor replied. Then he shrugged. "You don't believe me, naturally."

"I didn't say that," Basso replied. "And I'm prepared to accept that other people believe you. I don't suppose you could afford to dress like that if you made your living setting bones and lancing boils."

The doctor shrugged. "The King of Scleria believes me," he said. "And the Emperor is very interested. So far, though, I've only advised private individuals, in Scleria mostly. They had a bad outbreak the year before last, as I'm sure you know."

Basso nodded. "Different symptoms, though."

The doctor smiled. "I can see you're an intelligent man, First Citizen. You'd be surprised how many people take the view that plague is plague, and the symptoms don't really matter. In fact," he went on, "I was greatly impressed by the scientific approach you adopted during the recent outbreak. Partly, that's why I'm here."

"Partly," Basso repeated. "Well, for your information, we got it completely wrong. Everything we did was useless. We might as well not have bothered. But of course, you must know that."

The doctor nodded. "Since you raise the subject, yes," he said. "Your methodology was sound, but your conclusions were false. Understandably," he added; "after all, you were trying to figure out a cure while an outbreak was actually in progress. Hardly ideal conditions."

Basso shrugged. "Oh, I don't know," he said. "What better time to study something than when it's actually happening? But now we've got you," he said, "so all our problems are over. Yes?"

The doctor looked away, as though mildly offended. "What you call the plague," he said, "isn't just one disease. As far as I can tell from my researches, there are at least two quite separate diseases, both of which tend to get lumped together under the one description."

"Ah," Basso said. "Which one have you cured?"

The doctor looked at him. "Actually," he said, "it's more a matter of prevention."

"That's not what you said just now."

"True." The doctor dipped his head in formal acknowledgement. "But I had to make you listen to me."

Basso shrugged. "You shouldn't have done that. All you've achieved is to make me rather more sceptical than I would've been if you'd told the truth. Still, no great harm done. Tell me about it."

The doctor frowned. "Forgive me," he said. "There's the question of remuneration. If I tell you what I've found out..."

"I see." Basso sighed, then raised his right hand, mock-solemn. "If what you've got to say has any value, I'll see to it you get paid. If not, not. If you don't like the terms, go and advise somebody else."

He didn't like that, but Basso didn't care. "Very well," the doctor said. "Now, then. As I said just now, there are two different diseases. One of them, which I prefer to think of as the real plague, is spread by fleas."

“Fleas,” Basso repeated.

“That’s right.”

“In that case, we’re screwed,” Basso said. “Nothing anybody can do about fleas. They’re everywhere.”

“A specific variety of fleas,” the doctor said.

“There’s more than one kind?”

“Hundreds,” the doctor said. “And only one kind spreads the plague. The fleas live on the backs of rats and mice; they can survive for a short period on a cat or a dog, and on humans, though we aren’t their host of choice. They spread the plague that gives you boils and swellings, and death follows in about a fortnight. The plague you had here recently was the other kind.”

Basso nodded. “Quicker,” he said, “and no boils.”

“Exactly. That’s the other sort. Basically, it’s a strain of cattle sickness. The early symptoms—fever and so forth—are common to both diseases, but the sort you had kills you in a matter of days. You catch it by contact with infected animals or infected people, or from eating tainted meat.”

Basso held up his hand for silence; then he winced. “Auxentine salt beef,” he said.

The doctor nodded eagerly. “Exactly,” he said. “Because of the sharp, early winter last year in Auxentia, they killed off substantially more cattle at the end of autumn, salted the beef and sold it cheap. I’ve read your doctors’ report, and spoken to some of your leading merchants. Just before the outbreak, the market was flooded with cheap Auxentine salt beef. That’s what caused the disease.”

Basso stared at him. “So the ships...”

“Coincidence,” the doctor said, smiling. “I managed to see a copy of the ships’ inventory. They were carrying barrels of Auxentine beef as part of their provisions. They started exhibiting symptoms a day or so earlier than the people here simply because they’d started eating the poisoned meat earlier. If you like, they were the first victims, but not the cause.”

Basso nodded slowly. “So the steps we took...”

“Actually,” the doctor said, “you almost certainly saved thousands of lives. You herded large numbers of people together, away from their homes, and fed them mostly bread, with some cheese and dried fish; no beef. I’m prepared to bet that the ones who died were the ones who had the foresight

to take food with them from their homes when they were evacuated. Of course,” he went on, “once the disease was well established, there was a certain amount of cross-infection; it’s mildly contagious, as far as I can tell, though there has to be substantial contact. Being in the same room or breathing the same air won’t do it.”

Basso rubbed his face with his hands. “This is just a theory,” he said. “We had theories of our own. At the time, they seemed to make perfect sense.”

“Excuse me.” This time, he’d definitely given offence. “My theory, as you call it, has been proved by extensive research and controlled experiment. In Scleria, I fed Auxentine salt beef, from a batch I had excellent reason to believe to be tainted, to condemned debtors in a town prison. Eight out of twelve of them developed symptoms; five of them died. I repeated the experiment with Hus prisoners of war in Auxentia, with comparable results. My researches in Auxentia—”

“Just a moment,” Basso said. “You took perfectly healthy people and you gave them the plague.”

The doctor frowned. “I think I mentioned that the subjects were prisoners,” he said. “And besides, if we can prevent plague in future, we’ll save thousands of lives; quite possibly millions. If you have reservations about the morality of the experiments, you might care to consider the ethics of sending soldiers to fight in a war.”

Basso shook his head. “I don’t want to talk about ethics,” he said. “I just find it hard to believe a human being could do something like that. I’ve always had this idea that death is on one side and the human race is on another, and you don’t do deals with the enemy. But,” he went on, before the doctor could interrupt, “your point about soldiers is trite but basically valid, so we won’t go there. I guess that so long as you haven’t actually murdered anyone in Vesani territory, it’s none of my business.”

The doctor wasn’t even trying not to scowl at him. No matter. “I have extensive notes,” the doctor said, “and observations verified by independent witnesses. My theory is proven fact. Accordingly, I can prevent further outbreaks of the disease.”

Basso sighed. All he wanted to do was get rid of the man as quickly as possible. “Tainted meat,” he said. “So how do we know if it’s tainted?”

“By testing,” the doctor said. “And quarantine. Samples of all preserved beef brought into the country should be fed to prisoners. Should no symptoms occur within seven days, the meat is safe and can be released for sale. Follow this simple precaution, and you will effectively eliminate the threat. Of course, there’s still a danger from smuggled beef, so you may care to step up your border and customs controls. Generally, though, it should be self-regulating. Once people know that smuggled meat may kill them, the appetite for it should diminish, or at least restrict itself to the lower orders of society.”

Basso nodded slowly. “And the other sort of plague,” he said. “The one spread by fleas. What do you suggest we do about that?”

The doctor shrugged. “That’s up to you,” he said. “I would recommend setting up a facility on one of your offshore islands where all incoming ships must wait for twenty-eight days before being allowed to dock in the main harbour. I don’t suppose you’d find that acceptable, politically or commercially.”

Basso smiled at him. “Not really,” he said.

“In that case, I suggest you keep your streets swept, and offer a bounty of a florin a dozen for rats’ tails. It may help. It’ll almost certainly win you votes.”

Basso’s smile widened, to reveal all his teeth. “I might just do that,” he said. “Jobs for poor people, and it may even be useful. I think we’ll just have to take our chances with the beef imports. If we get another outbreak, at least we’ll know what to tell people.”

The doctor looked at him, then shrugged. “My fee,” he said, “is one million nomismata.”

Basso shook his head sadly. “Five thousand,” he said. “Buy yourself another pair of shoes. Oh, and you have forty-eight hours to leave the city. If you’re still here after that, I’ll have you arrested for murder.”

(“But he was right,” Melsuntha said later. “You should have paid him properly. Not a million, perhaps, but more than five thousand. Think of the lives that could be saved.”)

“I know,” Basso replied. “And I couldn’t think of an answer when he said I was as bad as him, because I send soldiers out to die for the greater good. So I was rude to him, and I underpaid him, and I told him to get out of town; I was just being spiteful, because he’s disgusting and he’s right.”

Basso spread his fingers wide. "Or at least, I couldn't show he was wrong, which really annoyed me."

"That's life," Melsuntha said. "Sometimes bad people are right, and sometimes good people are wrong. I'd have thought by now—"

"It's why Bassano has to be First Citizen," Basso said. "When he faces something like this, he'll know what to do. All I could manage was to act like a child.")

A messenger brought him a book: Cyanus' *Dialogues*, not the sort of thing Basso went in for. No name; his benefactor wished to remain anonymous.

Basso sent for Captain Tralles, a long, skinny Cazar recently assigned by General Aelius to be his personal security adviser. So far, Captain Tralles had spent his time wandering about the house, examining the windows and muttering about angles of fire. It was about time he did something useful.

"Someone sent me this," Basso said.

Tralles looked at the book, lying on a desk in the cartulary annex, as though it was some rare variety of venomous reptile. "I see," he said. "Do you know who sent it?"

Basso shook his head. "I heard something once about a book with poisoned pages," he said. "For all I know, it could just be an extended metaphor, but I thought..."

"Well-known technique in the Eastern Empire," Tralles said. "Several well-documented cases." He leaned over the book, taking great care not to let any part of his clothing brush against it, and sniffed. He had an enormous nose. Basso wondered whether he'd had it cut off someone else and sewn on, specially.

"None of the commoner poisons," Tralles said. "Could be wormsbane or ceraunus oil; they don't have a smell. But in that case, I'd expect some slight discoloration of the pages." He drew a long, slim dagger and carefully flipped open the front cover with its point. "Someone's written something here, look," he said. "Does it mean anything to you?"

Basso peered over his shoulder, then laughed. "It's all right," he said. "That's my nephew's writing. Thanks anyway, but I've wasted your time."

Tralles didn't look at all convinced, but Basso shooed him away. Then he read the message again.

I need to see you. This evening, the House?

No way of replying. He tried to put it out of his mind for the rest of the day. Normally, there would have been enough work on his desk to keep him fully occupied, but as luck would have it, the world was maliciously quiet, and he was reduced to reading diplomatic dispatches from the Republic's man in Scleria—a waste of time, since the Sclerians never told anybody anything. He found a mildly entertaining account of the election of a new cardinal, to replace Magnentius IX, who'd finally died at the monstrous age of ninety-six. Apparently, the college of electors had been unable to reach a decision. They'd been in continuous conclave for three months, and the King, after dropping increasingly heavy hints, had tried to concentrate their minds by having the tiles stripped off the roof of the chapter house—quite an incentive, in the middle of a Sclerian winter. But even that hadn't been enough, and so the King had brought matters to a head by proposing his own compromise candidate: his nephew, a boy of nineteen, whose only known talent was the ability to swallow pickled eggs whole. The boy was not, of course, a priest, but that was by no means an insuperable obstacle. He was, the report said, ordained on the first of the month, made a deacon the next day, and elected abbot of a monastery by the end of the week. The compromise would have worked, the report went on, had it not been for one Constituatus, abbot of Barcy, an outsider in the pre-compromise race; when the King's nephew had been duly elected and was in the process of being invested with the symbols of office, Constituatus snatched the sacred cope, mitre and mantle from the attendants, wriggled into the mantle, jammed the mitre on his head, planted himself firmly on the episcopal throne and declared himself to be cardinal Magnentius X, equal of the apostles, vice-regent of the Invincible Sun. In his haste he'd put the mantle on the wrong way round and hadn't even tried to assume the cope, but when they tried to drag him out of the throne he clung to the arms and bit the attendant's hands; since he weighed a good twenty stone and had started life as a stevedore in the dockyards, it proved impossible to dislodge him. After he'd been there forty-eight hours, the King gave in and ratified his election, on the grounds that if he wanted the job that much, he might as well have it. The royal nephew's reaction had not been made public, but was assumed to be one of profound relief.

Basso wrote a polite note to the new cardinal, congratulating him on his election and expressing the wish that the excellent relations between the Sclerian Curia and the Vesani Studium would continue to flourish. He resisted the temptation to append a gift of the justly famous Vesani birch-syrup toffee (sure to be appreciated by a man with strong jaws), sending instead a richly illuminated copy of Xenophanes' commentary on the Western Psalter (Constituatus, according to the dispatches, couldn't read and had to sign his name with a stencil) and a large box of candied figs.

Then, quite suddenly, there was a clerk standing in the doorway, telling him that his nephew was there to see him. Basso jumped up, knocking papers off his desk. The clerk stood there, waiting for something. Basso remembered he'd been asked a question.

"I'll see him in the treaty room," he said. "Get a fire lit, and fetch some brandy."

Not that Bassano drank brandy any more. The clerk went out; Basso hesitated, though he wasn't sure why. He pulled himself together, put the letters he'd written on the table by the door, to be collected in the morning, and went slowly down the stairs.

Bassano was sitting by the fire, looking cold; he had his coat on and his collar up. He felt the cold more than anybody Basso had ever known, apart from his sister.

"You walked," Basso said.

Bassano nodded awkwardly; he was shivering. "Habit I picked up at fencing school," he said. "Exercise. It's funny, I always hated exercise, and now I do some every day. Can't seem not to, if you see what I mean."

Basso poured him a small brandy, which he gobbled down. It stopped him shivering. "Well?" he said.

"My mother." Bassano was flexing his fingers. "She says that unless I promise never to speak to you again, she'll have you charged with killing my father."

"That's right," Basso said calmly. He was pleased with himself for that. "She came to see me. First time in a long time."

"Well?"

Basso shrugged. "I told her to go ahead. I said she'd be doing me a favour."

"Maybe you'd care to explain that."

Basso explained. When he'd finished, Bassano sat up straight in his chair and said, "Is that true?"

"Yes," Basso replied. "If she were to go ahead, I'm not sure yet how I'd play it. Killing the charges would be the safest way, but I'd be tempted to let it go to trial. Show the people that the First Citizen doesn't consider himself to be above the law."

"And you're sure you'd be acquitted. You're *sure*."

"Yes," Basso said. "For a start, I'd take a few simple precautions, like choosing my own jury. Say, two newly enfranchised foreigners, two Bank employees, a couple of clerks from the House and someone who owes me money—a truly representative cross-section of society, when you think about it. Also, for what it's worth, I'm innocent. And I can prove it, even without suborning false witnesses, which of course I'd do anyway. Also, I'd retain the best lawyers in the City for my defence, and hire all the other half-competent lawyers on other matters, so they wouldn't be available to act for your mother. Apart from that, and a few well-chosen words to the judge beforehand, I'd be happy to let justice take its course."

Bassano frowned, then laughed. "I guess I didn't really think it through," he said. "I was scared. She sounded so convincing."

Basso smiled. "She thinks I'd be afraid of the scandal," he replied. "But the killing's been common knowledge for twenty years, and apart from the daily patter of jokes and sly comments, it's never done me any harm. Getting it out in the open would probably do more good than harm. No, what she's relying on is that you'll believe there's a serious threat. I think it may be hard for me to forgive her for that, but I'll try."

"Well, then." Bassano stretched like a cat. "In that case, three cheers for our legal system."

"Best in the world," Basso replied gravely. "Did you know she tried to have me killed?"

There was a silence so brittle that a sound would have splintered the world. "Do you mean that?"

Basso nodded. "Ask Aelius if you don't believe me. She arranged it through the Studium, which is really high-class; I dread to think how much it cost her, and she's comfortable, but not exactly rich, by social-register standards." He shook his head. "They shot at me with an artillery piece, of

all things. Came this close.” He held his hands about eight inches apart. “Not bad shooting, at two hundred and fifty yards.”

Bassano looked at him. “Why?”

“I don’t think she likes me,” Basso replied. “Also, my guess is, she knows as well as we both do that her grand threat isn’t going to work. Frustration, I suppose, at losing to me yet again. She always did have a nasty temper when she couldn’t get her own way.”

Bassano was sitting very still. “What are you going to do?” he said.

“Nothing,” Basso replied. “Well, I’m hardly going to hang my own sister, and if I take it out on the hired hands, one of them’s bound to try and drag her into it. Better to let the whole thing slide and blame it on the Mavortines.” He paused. “I wasn’t going to tell you,” he went on, “and probably I shouldn’t have done. It doesn’t change anything, and you’ll think I’m being spiteful, turning you against her. I’m sorry.”

“No,” Bassano said, his voice a little shaky. “No, you had to tell me.”

“I had to tell someone,” Basso replied. “Couldn’t tell Aelius, he’d be livid, try and make me do something. Antigonus is dead. Melsuntha would probably arrange to have your mother poisoned; she’s rather protective of me, which is sweet, but not appropriate in this instance. So that just leaves you. Like I said, I’m sorry.” He took a deep breath, then went on, “Please, if you can, don’t hold it against her. She’s quite right that I ruined her life. I’d let her have her precious revenge if I wasn’t quite so selfish. Also,” he added, “I’ve got you to think about, though that probably comes under the heading of my selfishness. Anyway, try and forget about it.”

Bassano grinned. “You know,” he said, “that may not be possible. It’s the sort of thing that tends to stick in your mind.”

“Your mother,” Basso said with a sigh. “My sister. You know, there are times when I catch myself thinking that my life would be a whole lot more pleasant without her. Oh, I don’t mean have her killed,” he added quickly, “and I was worried to death when the plague was on, in case she caught it. No, what I mean is, I find it hard not to blame her, for a whole lot of things that are really my fault. And every time something good happens, or something turns out just right, and I’m inclined to feel happy about it, I think about your mother, and how I’ve made her life so utterly miserable, and I’ll be honest with you, I don’t know what to do. Worst possible thing for someone like me, knowing there’s a problem that can’t ever be fixed.”

Bassano said carefully, deliberately weighing each word: "I find it hard to remember that I'm her son. Like this last business. She'd have stopped me if she could; not because it's wrong for me, but to spite you. I find that..." He paused, then went on, "I find that inconsistent with the proper functions of motherhood. I don't think she really feels anything for me."

Basso nodded. "My fault, again," he said. "I should've stayed away from you. But I was misguided enough to think that helping you along might make it up to her in some way; and by the time I realised that was the last thing she wanted, it was too late. I'd got to know you, and you weren't just her son any more, you were Bassano, and I couldn't make myself give you up, not even for the sake of doing the right thing. With the result," he went on, "that as far as she's concerned, you're a weapon in the fight between her and me; a bit like two men struggling over one knife, and whoever gets control of it kills the other. I think it was Sostratus or someone like that who said people are the best weapons. Always thought it was rather a glib little quote, but actually it's about right. And that's my fault," he said. "That was my second unforgivable crime; and it wasn't self-defence, and I did have a choice, and I was selfish. For crying out loud, Bassano," he said, and his voice was loud, half-joking, "look what I've done to you. Killed your father, turned your mother against you, messed your whole life up for you. Don't you feel that?"

Bassano shook his head. "No," he said. He thought for a while, then went on: "It might have been different if I could remember my father, but I can't. And I think my mother stopped loving me when I was quite young, so that's another thing I never knew and so haven't missed. And you were the first person who ever talked to me like you were talking to a grown-up."

Basso laughed. "Funny you should say that. I don't think anybody ever noticed I was a child. Gloriously self-centred man, my father was, and my mother treated everybody like they were a bit stupid." He shrugged. "I guess love when I was growing up was a bit like the heating in a big house, where they've got a great big boiler out back and pipes under the floor. It's there, but you don't see an open fire in the hearth. Result, you're never cold but you're never really warm, either." Suddenly he yawned, and said, "I get the impression you've made up your mind."

"Have I?" Bassano frowned. "Yes, now you mention it, I suppose I have, without noticing. Because when my mother said, I'm doing this,

which means you can't go, I felt hurt and angry, like someone had taken something away from me. So, yes, I'll go."

"Splendid," Basso said crisply. "Only now there's a condition. You can only go if you can promise me you're not just doing it to get back at your mother."

Bassano pursed his lips, swallowing a smile. "All of a sudden you're so concerned about reasons, Uncle Basso. You of all people should know there doesn't have to be just one reason."

"Funny man," Basso said sourly. "And it doesn't work, because you're not me."

"Accepted," Bassano said. "In which case, yes, I promise. Malice isn't my primary motive."

"Fine," Basso said. "What is?"

"You know what, I have no idea." Bassano shrugged. "I just asked myself, 'do I want to do this?', and I answered myself, 'yes, I do.' " He raised his eyebrows. "Is that a valid reason, do you think?"

Basso said solemnly, "It's the only one that's any good at all."

Twelve

“All I have to do,” Basso said, “is write a letter, and twelve thousand Cazars drop what they’re doing and come running. Must be a strange place, where you come from.”

Aelius laughed. “I think you’d find it very strange,” he said. “Basically, it’s a mess. If you’d ever been there, you’d understand why its population’s so mad keen to escape.”

Basso frowned. “Oh come on,” he said. “It can’t be that bad.”

On the table between them lay the muster requisitions, now duly ratified by the House. They authorised the First Citizen to hire soldiers, at his unfettered discretion, for the Mavortine war. Basso himself had insisted on a maximum of fifteen thousand for a period of six months; the House would have given him twice that, or simply left the number, duration of service and scales of pay entirely up to him.

“If I say it’s a sea of grass,” Aelius said, “you’d think it was just a cliché. Also, the sea’s flat. The Peninsular is—well, it’s like the desert, only it’s green, not white or red. We haven’t got hills so much as dunes in the grass. And open, as far as the eye can see.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” Basso said.

“Then I’m not describing it right,” retorted Aelius. “For one thing, there’s no trees. There used to be a few, but my people cut them all down and split them up really small to make into arrow-shafts, or charcoal for steelworking. Talking of which, all the weapons and bits of armour are really old; there’s nothing left to burn, so we can’t make anything any more, and we can’t afford to import, not even pick-ups from other people’s

battlefields. Everything's old and mended so many times you can't see what it used to look like when it was new. Everywhere's so overgrazed now, we kill most of our calves at ten months, and then we have to sell nearly all the meat to buy grain for the winter."

Basso nodded. "Cazar veal," he said. "I assumed it was your traditional delicacy."

"Hardly." Aelius grinned. "On the rare occasions we eat beef, it's some stringy old brood cow that's gone barren or dropped dead. Literally, it hurts your jaws chewing it, and it's always undercooked because we're so short of fuel for our fires. We sell all our wool and hides, we get pennies for them because the Auxentines have basically got a monopoly and decide the prices. We live in turf shacks in the winter and tents in summer, because there's no building wood and no stone worth a damn; it's all chalk." He shook his head sadly. "In all our history we've never been conquered by foreigners, and you know why? Not because we're such wonderful fighters. It's because we haven't got anything worth conquering us for."

"Except lead," Basso said quietly. "And tin, and a bit of silver."

"Why bother?" Aelius was scowling. "When we'll dig it out of the ground for you and deliver it to the beach, in return for less wheat and barley than you'd feed to your chickens. We can't use it ourselves, nothing to melt it down with. The worst part of it," Aelius added, "is that it's all our own fault. Can't blame wicked imperialist foreigners, because we've always been left alone. The fact of it is, the land sucks, but the worst thing about it is the people."

Basso made a maybe-you're-right gesture. "The strange thing is," he said, "Cazars over here are as good as gold—they work hard, they're happy with low wages and rotten living conditions, they don't cause trouble; they make the best soldiers in the world. Why aren't they like that at home, I wonder?"

"On their best behaviour," Aelius replied sourly, "for fear they'll get sent home."

Twelve thousand men, out of thin air. The recruiting officers said that the only problem had been choosing who to accept out of so many eminently suitable, desperately eager candidates.

They arrived on grain freighters, lumber boats and stone barges, all wearing identical light brown woollen shirts, trousers and shaggy-fringed cloaks, each man carrying a goatskin bowcase and quiver and an empty satchel woven from dried rushes, which had contained their three days' rations for the journey.

("They travel light, then," Basso said.

"Not difficult," Aelius replied. "That's all they've got.")

Basso had appointed a man called Choniates, a senior supervisor from the Severus shipyards, to deal with housing, feeding, clothing and equipping them. It was an appalling task, which Choniates carried out calmly and efficiently; all Basso had to do was approve and sign the book-thick sheaves of bills that arrived on his desk twice a day. Choniates requisitioned the old, disused cattle market, two miles outside the City. The sheds he had built there were brutally sparse (still better than anything you'd find back home, Aelius said), but the roofs were weathertight and the chimneys drew; the men slept on fleeces on the floor and ate three meals a day, porridge, bread and bean-and-bacon stew. The building materials, fleeces and most of the food were supplied to the government by a specially formed trading consortium, financed and largely owned by the Bank of Charity & Social Justice, at five per cent above cost; because the company's buyers had struck such good deals with suppliers in Scleria and the West, the company made good money and the Treasury paid less than market wholesale. Any other mercantile concern in the Republic wouldn't have broken even at those prices. Military equipment, everything from helmets to boot-nails to corn-mills, had to come from the Arsenal, which meant that deliveries were late or non-existent, and the quality was embarrassing. On Basso's instructions, Choniates had every item inspected, and everything that didn't meet the Arsenal's own specifications (well over half, as it turned out) was stamped with a Condemned mark, returned and not paid for. Very soon, furious questions were asked in the House, and the Arsenal's monopoly, enshrined in law for a hundred years, was quickly withdrawn. The resulting tender was won by a specially formed manufacturing consortium, financed and largely owned by the Bank. Production got under way astonishingly quickly—Basso had been quietly buying up plant and equipment and poaching the Arsenal's best workers ever since the war was

first debated—and both quality and productivity were well above specification, for a fraction more than the Arsenal would have charged.

(“You can call it that if you like,” Basso said to Bassano. “I call it business. All good stuff, all on time, under budget. I can’t help it if we make money at the same time.”)

“Yes, Uncle,” Bassano said, grinning.

“Besides.” Basso frowned. “The Bank needs the money. There’s a good chance we’ll be lending a whole lot to the Treasury before all this is over. If we haven’t got it, we can’t lend it.”

“True,” Bassano replied. “And do you think it makes any difference that, to all intents and purposes, you’ll be lending the Treasury its own money?”

Basso considered that for a moment, then said, “No.”)

As well as the twelve thousand infantry, Basso had hired three thousand Hus light cavalry. They, however, would be shipped direct to Mavortis when the time came. They had everything they needed already, and they came with a reputation for not being able to tell the difference between friendly civilians and the enemy.

Aelius lent Bassano a book. It was, Bassano said later, the most incongruous moment of his life. “In a way, it was like someone pouring an eggcupful of water into the sea,” he said. “After all, I’ve spent my entire life reading books, it’s really the only thing I’m any good at. And there’s Aelius: only ever owned one book in his life, and he’s lending it to me.”

Basso raised an eyebrow. “What’s it called?”

“*The Art of War*,” Bassano said. “By Jotapianus Tacticus.”

“Never heard of it.”

“Nor me,” Bassano confessed. “And I’ve been through the Academy library, and the House library, and all the booksellers; I thought I’d got the complete set of military manuals.”

“Read any of them?”

“Every one,” Bassano said. “No, really. I’ve always been a quick reader. Right now I’m gorged with strategic and tactical information, like a flea full of blood. How much of it I’ll remember in two weeks’ time is anybody’s guess, but right now, I’m probably the world’s leading expert on military

theory. Stress on the word theory,” he added with a grin. “As far as I’m concerned, it’s four-dimensional chess, plus an enormous amount of administration and bureaucracy. I can tell you exactly how to compile a composite matériel status database, as recommended by Chrysostomatus.”

Basso winced. “Please don’t.”

“You don’t know what you’re missing,” Bassano said. “But anyway, I went through all the summaries and epitomes and concordances, and there’s no references anywhere to Jotapianus Tacticus; he’s not part of the orthodox canon, which would tend to suggest he’s no good.”

“Have you read it?”

Bassano nodded. “It’s pretty basic stuff,” he said. “Large chunks are just copied out of earlier books, and the original material is either banal or bizarre. I think it’s probably a potboiler slung together in five minutes by some hack, a hundred and twenty years ago.”

Basso shrugged. “Ah well.”

“Quite. Only,” Bassano went on, “Aelius obviously worships it like it’s the true revelation of the Invincible Sun. It’s practically falling to bits, and it’s been lovingly stitched and pasted back together again I don’t know how many times. I get the impression he carries it with him everywhere he goes, and reads a chapter every night before going to sleep. Which is crazy,” Bassano added, “since Aelius has forgotten more about soldiering than this Jotapianus character ever knew.”

“Make a point of thanking him,” Basso said.

“Oh, I will.” He grinned. “I believe he’ll be vastly relieved to get it back. He’s asked me twice already if I’ve had a chance to look at it yet, and what did I think of it?”

Bassano went further. On a whim, he hired the best firm of professional researchers in the City, and when they discovered a copy of *Further Observations on the Art of War* by Jotapianus Tacticus in an obscure sub-faculty library’s reserve stacks, he had it copied out (with the illustrations) and gave it to Aelius when he returned his book. Aelius was stunned and couldn’t think of anything to say. It was quite embarrassing, Bassano said, and he was glad to get away without being cried over. Basso, however, thought that the kindest thing Bassano did was not tell Aelius about the brief article on Jotapianus the researchers found in the *General Summary*, a three-hundred-year-old Auxentine encyclopedia. Jotapianus, it turned out,

was a schoolteacher from a small town in the Eastern Empire, author of over a hundred books, ninety-eight of which had not survived, on a range of subjects from astronomy to fish recipes; his entire output was summed up by the encyclopedia with the single word “worthless”.

“We need a proper map,” Basso said.

The two officers from Intelligence looked at each other.

“Unfortunately...”

“There isn’t one,” Basso said. “I know. Get one drawn.”

The senior intelligence officer opened his mouth to explain why that wouldn’t be possible, then thought better of it. He went back to his office at the war department, sent for his adjutant and said, “We need a brand new map of Mavortis. The whole of it, not just the bits near the coast that we know about.”

“Can’t be done,” the adjutant replied. “Even the Mavortines don’t—”

The senior intelligence officer raised his hand for silence. “That’s a direct order from the First Citizen,” he said.

“Big deal,” the adjutant said. “He can order me to steal the stars and string them into a necklace for his wife; doesn’t mean it can be done. You’d need to carry out a complete survey. Men with rods and tapes and compasses, triangulation points, the whole business. We can’t send two hundred surveyors into Mavortis. The locals’d eat them.”

The senior intelligence officer looked at him. “It’s now your responsibility,” he said. “Think of something.”

The adjutant, second-generation military, City-born with a Cazar father and a Jazygite mother, newly enfranchised under Basso’s law, obtained a labour requisition which gave him the power to conscript civilians into military service. He then rounded up a hundred and seventy-five Mavortines, most of them unskilled labour from the docks and the building trade. They were going home, he told them. That didn’t go down well, until he explained that once they’d done a job for him, they could come back; they’d also be paid more money than they’d ever seen in their lives. Even so, eleven refused to cooperate, and were discharged.

The remaining hundred and sixty-one needed a lot of intensive training. They were taught how to walk in measured strides, each stride exactly one

yard, and trained to count silently up to one hundred thousand. They were taught how to take precise bearings using only the sun and a known reference point; how to draw a map; how to hide a map from a thorough intrusive search. They were then given five nomismata each, which they were not allowed to spend. They were sent to Mavortis, where they explained that they'd just been paid off by the Vesani government after completing their contract, and had been given an unexpected bonus of five nomismata, which they proposed to invest in land. On the pretext of looking for somewhere to buy, they proceeded to walk the length and breadth of Mavortis, counting their strides, carefully noting their bearings, establishing clandestine triangulation points, recording their data secretly at night, often in the dark. They'd been given a month to do the job, at the end of which a ship would anchor off the White Rocks. If they missed the ship, they were told, they needn't bother coming back to the City ever again.

Two of the surveyors didn't make the rendezvous. One of them was known to be dead, from mountain fever; the other one was presumed to have met some similar fate. On the two-day journey back to the City they presented their maps to a team of military cartographers, who began the horrendous job of correlating them and producing the component parts that would make up the finished map. By the time the ship docked (there were carriages waiting, to take the cartographers and the surveyors straight to Intelligence) there was already a first draft: a huge, unruly thing, covered with scrawled numbers and scraped-out lines, but mostly—amazingly—coherent. It was a miracle, the cartographers said, the way the surveyors' findings dovetailed together. The results actually matched; which simply wouldn't have been possible if the data wasn't fundamentally accurate. A hundred and fifty-nine illiterates, walking carefully and counting under their breath, had produced a map the Vesani could go to war by.

"Told you it was possible," Basso said to the intelligence officers, when they handed him the first fair copy. He spent two hours alone with it, then sent it to Aelius.

"Did you know," someone asked him, "that at the University of Gopessus in Scleria, they've got a Faculty of War? One full professor, six or seven lecturers, and I do believe there's a Reader in Artillery Studies."

Basso hadn't known that. He thought about it for a while, then wrote a letter to the Vesani chargé d'affaires, to be sent by the fast post.

Fast post meant the first available ship, followed by a non-stop relay of riders, changing horses every fifteen miles. The letter reached Gopessus two days and six hours after Basso had blotted it with fine white sand. It was addressed to the Professor of War.

As requested, the professor wrote back by return. His reply took two days and fourteen hours, because of the prevailing winds. It was written on the back of Basso's letter, to save time, and read:

Delighted to accept. Will bring lecs in tactics & supply and reader in art stud

"I offered him two thousand nomismata," Basso explained, "plus seven hundred each for any of his colleagues he chose to bring with him. Nothing like getting advice from the best in the business."

The professor and his associates arrived by the fast relay service: non-stop coaches, three days and two hours. They crawled out of the carriage like men released from intensive interrogation, and were helped up the steps of the Severus house, where they'd be staying. As soon as he'd been told they'd arrived, Basso had sent for Aelius, Bassano and the entire general staff, together with six members of the House war oversight committee. They crowded into the long dining room, where Basso's father used to stage his political dinner parties. Grudgingly, he allowed them time to change their clothes, wash and shave; but food, he insisted, could wait until after the lecture.

When the last speaker had finished talking, there was a long silence. Then the professor asked nervously if there were any questions. There were. Most of them started "Did you know" or "Are you aware", and Basso couldn't help but admire the way they managed to avoid answering them. Not bad, he felt, for four exhausted men who'd been shaken to death in a succession of fast mail coaches. When the questions had petered out, he thanked them for coming and got rid of them. Their money was waiting for them on their beds.

"Well," Aelius said. "We've learned one thing. We now know we're a damn sight better informed than the Sclerians."

"Worth every penny, in that case," Basso said. He leaned to his right. "Colonel Doricho," he said. "What was all that about effective ranges of

heavy torsion artillery?”

“Bullshit,” the colonel said. “That clown wanted us to believe the maximum range for a ten-ton-counterweight trebuchet throwing a two-hundredweight stone is two hundred and forty yards. I’ve got one in the yard right now that can chuck two hundredweight three hundred and ten, and that’s an old model. The one we’re building for the war should be able to do three hundred and fifty, no trouble.”

Basso smiled. “And the glass bombs,” he said. “That sounded interesting.”

“Load of rubbish,” put in a Jazygite brigadier. “He got that out of a book. You try and lob a glass ball full of Vesani fire mixture from a standard trebuchet, it’ll shatter before it leaves the sling. It’s been copied from book to book for hundreds of years, but nobody’s ever been stupid enough to try it.”

“He believed it, though,” Bassano said.

“Dare say he did. The Hus believe the sky is the belly of a huge pregnant woman touching her toes. Doesn’t mean it’s true.”

Bassano didn’t elaborate his point. He could see Basso understood. The others didn’t matter.

“Sorry, First Citizen,” said one of the oversight committee men, “but it looks like we’ve wasted our money. They didn’t tell us anything we didn’t already know.”

Basso’s face was straight, but his eyes were sparkling. “Don’t worry about the money,” he said. “I issued the invitation, I’ll pay them their fee, and the expenses.”

The committee men looked rather sad; they’d been hoping to make a little recreational trouble. “Extremely generous gesture,” one of them said, and the other guests made polite rumbling noises to express their agreement. “And I suppose it was worth trying. You weren’t to know the men were charlatans.”

“Oh, they weren’t that,” Basso said. “No shame in ignorance, provided you rectify it as and when you can.”

The Sclerians didn’t go home straight away. Basso asked them to stay over for a day or so, and found time for several long discussions. When Aelius asked him why he was bothering, he shrugged the question away. When Bassano asked him—

“Actually,” Basso said, “they’re a mine of useful information. It’s like when they dig for silver. For every ton of silver you find, you get five tons of lead. Some seams, the poorer ones, the ratio’s more like one to eight. Now, just suppose it was the lead you were actually after.”

Bassano frowned, then laughed. “You were finding out if they’re really as dumb as they look, or whether it was an act they were putting on, to mislead us into thinking...”

Basso nodded. “Not an act,” he said. “That really was the cutting edge of Sclerian martial science. Which means, since the Sclerians fought a really serious war with the Empire about thirty years ago and came out very slightly ahead, and the Empire is known to be slightly in advance of the Auxentines...”

“We know more about it than anybody else,” Bassano said. “Yes, I see what you mean. You’d never get reliable information like that out of spies.” His eyebrows drew together; it made him look almost comically serious when he did that. “I was thinking, though. Just because a bunch of academics are a hundred years behind the times, does it follow that the actual soldiers are too? Could be that the university course is just a finishing school for gentlemen’s sons, and the real professional soldiers...”

Basso smiled. “I’m way ahead of you,” he said. “And no, apparently not. A degree from Gopessus is a requirement before you can be commissioned in the Sclerian army. Those no-hopers upstairs are responsible for educating the men we’ll be fighting in eight years’ time. Which,” he added, “is the most cheerful news I’ve heard in a long while.”

Aelius had studied the map. He’d had a dozen full copies made, together with three dozen half-scale versions and sector charts for use in the field, to be copied by the clerks of each unit. Something about it, though, was bothering him, and Basso was having trouble finding out what it was. “Like dealing with a woman,” he told Bassano sourly. “Something’s the matter, but when you ask what it is, all you get is *oh, nothing*, and then they sulk, because you’re supposed to be able to guess. I hate that,” he added.

“That’s not like Aelius,” Bassano said. “Straight questions and straight answers are more his style.”

“That’s why I’m worried,” Basso said.

The training of the recruits was going very well, Aelius said. They were, of course, born soldiers, and nobody could teach them anything about handling weapons or fieldcraft. Vesani military discipline and procedures, on the other hand, were completely alien to them, and they had to be trained from scratch as though they were city conscripts. Fortunately, they were both willing and able to learn. It helped tremendously that the Commander-in-Chief was a Cazar—a Cazar and a Vesani citizen, something that impressed them greatly; better still, a Cazar from a clan with whom very few of the clans who'd provided the bulk of the recruits had any subsisting blood feuds. The one point on which they had reservations was the fact that they'd be expected to cooperate with Hus cavalry. Not without a small kernel of good reason, the Cazars regarded the Hus as vicious barbarians who burnt villages for fun and killed women and children on sight. The Hus, in so far as anybody knew what they thought about anything, regarded any non-Hus as not really human, and therefore outside their bewilderingly complex concepts of chivalry and honour. They were, however, very keen to earn as many Vesani nomismata as possible; they took them home, drilled holes in them, and strung them into oppressively heavy headdresses for their mothers, wives and sweethearts.

“Don't even try to explain,” Basso said. “I don't understand strategy.”

Aelius gave him an impatient look, which glanced harmlessly off.

“You've read all those books.”

“True. I've also read *Adventures in Wonderland*, but that doesn't mean I know how to fly like a bird. You're the general, you do what you think's best. I'll stay here and sign things.”

So Aelius explained to the general staff instead. They made objections—some of them to show that they were awake and taking an intelligent interest, some because they were too stupid or narrow-minded to understand, a few because they could foresee real problems. Aelius reckoned he was extremely patient with them, and bitterly resented the reputation he quickly built up. But nobody was going to speak out in public against the man who'd beaten the Auxentines with cowshit and got the Treasury gold back without losing a man.

Then he explained to Bassano, who'd asked politely. They were in the drawing office on the second floor of the War Building (which was what everybody called it; strictly speaking it was a temple, but there weren't any priests). It was a long room with high windows, to catch the first and last light. There were long benches, where map-copiers sat, carefully painting seas blue, mountains brown, and forests a darker shade of green. At the north end there was a raised dais with a table running crosswise. For some reason, the war was being run from there; it was buried so deep in papers, books, reports, dispatches, inventories and rosters that Bassano wondered if Aelius was trying to grow his own coal.

"The problem," Aelius said, prodding the map in front of him with his broad, square-ended forefinger, "is this stuff here. All the brown and dark green. It cuts the country in two."

Bassano nodded. He'd figured that out for himself. "So we need to land in the north and the south simultaneously and work from the ends towards the middle."

Aelius laughed; private joke, presumably. "That'd be nice," he said. "But not practical. We've got enough ships and men, we can build carts, no trouble. What we're desperately short of is carthorses. No horses, no transport, no supplies; and you can forget about living off the land. The Mavortines can't manage it, and they live there. No, everything we eat and wear and use has got to come across the sea in ships, then cross-country on carts. We've got enough horses for one supply train, but not two."

Bassano pursed his lips. "Can't we get more horses?"

"Trying," Aelius said, massaging his eyebrows. "So far, no good. Cavalry horses, no problem; riding horses. But draught horses..." He sighed. "Far as I can gather, all the draught horses in the world come from the far north. They're a special breed, and the people who raise them don't sell stallions; they keep 'em all, so they've got the monopoly. Now apparently—this is what I've been told—they've had four really hard winters in a row up there, a lot of the young horses died, and there's snowdrifts blocking all the mountain passes, so the drovers can't get through. There haven't been any new horses on the market for three years. Prices have gone through the roof, and that's if you can find any to buy; most people who've got 'em are holding on to them because they need them for themselves. Requisitioning can only take us so far, because if we take all

the draught horses, how are they going to bring grain and flour into the City, let alone take out all the stuff we export? Truth is, we've got barely enough horses to keep the City running as it is."

"Mules," Bassano said.

Aelius nodded. "Good suggestion," he said. "But no, it won't work. It'd take twelve to fifteen mules to carry what you can get on one big cart, but they eat nearly half what a horse does. We haven't got the fodder, and if we did, we'd have to transport it, which means even more mules, and—you get the idea."

"Replace the City horses with mules and send the horses to Mavortis."

"Same objection. And you'd have thousands of mules in the streets all day long, instead of wheeled traffic only moving at night; the city'd be jammed up. Also, we'd still need more horses. Also, there just aren't enough mules in the world."

Bassano shrugged. "Forget that, then. What are you going to do?"

"There's not a lot I can do," Aelius said; he's controlling his temper, Bassano thought, because he doesn't want to shout at me. "If there's no horses, there's no horses. So we can't do a simultaneous landing. We'll just have to make the best of it."

Bassano said: "Have you mentioned this to my uncle?"

"He just says he doesn't understand strategy and whatever I do is fine by him."

"Flattering and completely unhelpful," Bassano said. "But have you asked him about horses specifically?"

Aelius confessed that he hadn't. "Didn't seem much point," he said. "If he's not interested in the grand design, I don't suppose he'll want to be bothered with details."

"I'm not so sure about that." Bassano was frowning. Aelius was beginning to understand that look. "A shortage of draught horses is something he can understand. It's just commodities. What he doesn't want to have to deal with is great big things like armies."

Aelius considered that. "He's lying, isn't he? He's read all the books. He must understand strategy."

"Of course he does," Bassano replied. "Also, he understands that he's read about it in books, which means that if he interferes, he could really

screw things up. My uncle has very few limitations, but he respects them so much he practically worships them.”

Bassano volunteered to ask Basso about horses. A week later, at the end of an intelligence briefing, Basso asked Aelius if he had a minute, and led him out into the garden.

“That’s new,” Aelius said, looking at a tall steel screen that blocked out the light from the street wall side.

Basso pulled a sour face. “That bloody security man of yours made me put it there,” he said, scowling viciously. “As if they’d try the same thing twice. Anyway, I’ve dealt with all that. There won’t be another attempt. At least, not by the same people.”

Aelius pulled a face and eloquently said nothing. Basso ignored him. “Horses.”

“Bassano told you about it, then.”

“Yes.” Basso poured Aelius a drink. “Just as well one of you’s prepared to talk to me.”

“I didn’t want to bother you with details.”

“This isn’t a detail,” Basso said severely. “It’s a detail-sized segment of a really big problem. Anyway, I think I might have something for you.”

He explained. He said that the True Way mining corporation (a joint venture between four leading Sclerian noble houses, the Sclerian government and three local princes) had an extensive copper-mining operation on the island of Feralia, sixty miles up the coast from the northern border of Mavortis. They were all deep mines, cut into the side of a substantial range of hills. In order to get the ore to the surface, they used ponies—small but incredibly sturdy animals who spent most of their lives underground, pulling heavily laden carts loaded with rock. He didn’t have accurate figures, but the people he’d talked to who’d been there and seen it estimated that they had to have at least a thousand ponies. He’d also talked to people who knew about horses (he made it sound as if they were experts in some abstruse dead language), who could see no reason why a thousand pit-ponies couldn’t do the work of, say, four hundred thoroughbred draught horses. Also, the ponies had been bred to live on practically nothing; a thousand of them would eat more or less the same amount of fodder as four hundred horses, possibly less. It wouldn’t take much to convert stone barges into horse transports, and they had plenty of barges. Well?

Aelius frowned. "Sounds ideal," he said. "How are you going to persuade the miners to lend us their ponies?"

"Simple," Basso replied. "I'll buy the mine. Then I'll close it down for the duration of the war. We could probably use the miners as engineers; very handy for siege operations, I believe, and I expect they could build walls and raise fortifications. It's all digging and shifting dirt, isn't it?"

"Buy the mine," Aelius repeated, as though the words made no sense. "Can you do that?"

"Actually, it's a nice little business," Basso said. "With the nomisma so strong against the Sclerian thaler, it wouldn't be a bad investment, long-term. When I say I'll buy the mine, of course, I mean a joint venture between the government and the Charity & Social Justice. What do you think?"

Aelius looked at him for a while. Then he said, "I think that if someone tried to rob you in the street, you'd pick his pocket, sell him a better knife and probably offer him a job as a tax collector."

Basso raised an eyebrow. "I choose to take that as a compliment," he said.

Nine hundred and twelve ponies, to be precise. Two-thirds of the miners enlisted; the remainder stayed on to maintain the mine workings, dig new shafts and build a new ore-washing plant, for when production resumed. The ponies were corralled close to the docks, to await collection.

Because he hadn't expected to be able to use them, Aelius hadn't done anything about getting or building carts for the ponies to pull. Basso turned over B Yard at the Severus shipyard to cart-building. The Severus cart was stronger, with a larger payload, and cheaper than anything the professional cartwrights could turn out. Basso gave orders for the yard managers to draw up plans for a cart factory, to be built as soon as possible.

The Hus cavalry had made their way to Leir, the port at which they were to embark for Mavortis. They were two months early. Basso had made sure there was food waiting for them, but they soon got bored, complained that they and their horses were getting fat, and started looting the neighbouring villages. The governor of Leir, nominally a dependency of the Empire, wrote Basso a formal complaint: if the nuisance didn't stop immediately,

he'd have no option but to send for help to the nearest Imperial garrison. As threats went, it was a fairly empty one. The nearest garrison was two hundred miles away, and although it had a paper strength of twelve hundred infantry, in practice it had eroded down to a hundred or so veterans, theoretically still on the reserve but in fact long since settled down on the scraps of land they'd been granted as their pensions. Rather more serious was the pretext such an appeal would give the Empire for future interference.

"They can't stay there," Aelius said, "and we can't send them to Mavortis on their own. Seems to me you've got no choice but to pay them off and send them home."

Basso gave him a sour look. "Even if I did that," he said, "which I'm not going to, there's no guarantee they'd go. If they like it there and the pickings are easy, they'll stay, until someone sends an army and pushes them out. No, we'll have to think of something else."

As so often recently, he looked for inspiration in a map, and duly found it. There was an island, Voroe, some twenty miles down the coast from Leir. Basso had heard of it, vaguely; something or other came from there (he couldn't remember what offhand), but it could have been on the Moon for all he knew or cared. But Voroe turned out to be another leftover scrap of the Empire; at least, nobody had bothered to conquer it when the Imperial forces withdrew, and so it didn't belong to anybody else (the idea that it might belong to itself was not the sort of thing that occurred to diplomats and formulators of high strategy). According to the reference he found in the *Complete Description of the World*, the lamentably fallible standard text on faraway places, it had one city, also called Voroe, about the size of an Auxentine market town, and half a dozen vaguely defined villages. Its sole export (Basso remembered as soon as he read it) was oyster shells, of the rare and precious variety that, when ground into powder, could be used as purple dye.

"But why?" Aelius objected.

Basso counted off the reasons on his fingers. "To get them out of Leir, before they trash the place," he said. "To secure Voroe as a base of operations; we can stockpile supplies there, rather than hauling them direct from the City. To give the Hus people to rob who don't matter to anybody but themselves."

“It’s Imperial territory,” Aelius objected.

“I was coming to that,” Basso said. “One finger left, see? To find out if the Empire’s looking in this direction these days. As you know, I believe it may well be, but it’d be nice to have it confirmed one way or another.”

“Fine,” Aelius said. “Leave them in Leir. We know that’s Imperial.”

Basso shook his head. “If we leave them there causing trouble, after we’ve been politely asked to get them out, that’d be a hostile act, which could be held against us later on when the Empire’s looking to pick a fight. If we send them to Voroe and the Empire objects, we can say we’re terribly sorry, we didn’t realise the island was still part of the Empire, and of course we’ll remove our forces—by the time the messengers have shuttled back and forth we’ll be ready to ship them to Mavortis in any case. If that happens, we’ll ask the Empire for permission to have a base on Voroe; they’ll say yes because we were good about withdrawing our forces. Or, if we don’t get a protest from the Imperials, we’ll know they’re still too busy cutting each other’s throats to give a damn about the West.”

Basso wrote a formal apology to the mayor of Leir, and the Hus went to Voroe, where they sacked the town, raided the villages and robbed a Sclerian merchant fleet who’d come to collect a shipment of oyster shell. Not a word from the Empire. Basso set up a trading company to collect, process and market purple dye; its product was good-quality and considerably cheaper than the imported Sclerian equivalent, and proved extremely popular. The Hus, once they’d slaughtered every living creature on Voroe (apart from Basso’s men, who they knew were off-limits), started to complain about being bored. Since they were on an island and had no ships, Basso ignored them.

Reluctantly, the city prefect gave orders for Basso to be informed. It was the middle of the night. Fortunately, he was still awake, as anybody who’d known him would have realised.

His sons, the prefect’s men informed him, were in the central Guard station, in the cells. The prefect deeply regretted that this had proved necessary. However, given the gravity of the charges, he had no choice. He assumed that Basso would want to come over straight away.

Basso thanked the prefect's men politely, and said it could wait till morning. Then he sent for Cinio, Sentio and the Secretary of the Interior, a new appointee by the name of Furio.

"Basically it's up to you," Furio said. He was a young man, chosen mainly for his energy and appetite for administrative trivia; short, thin, pale-eyed, with unusually large feet. "If you give me a direct order, I can have them out of there and the charges torn up in half an hour. If you want my opinion, politically, I think you can get away with it. As far as I can tell at this stage, the girls are nobody special; your people can make it sound like they're just a couple of tarts, and things got a bit out of hand. Then I assume you'll bury it with war news."

"Or," Basso said.

Furio frowned. "Or," he said, "they'll be remanded in custody while the complaint is processed, and within three days they'll appear in front of the investigating magistrate. I can make sure he knows the score. We'll have to make him a judge, but that's easy enough."

Basso shook his head. "That'd be begging the Optimates to make him a better offer," he said. "I have a deep-rooted objection to giving hostages."

"Well," Furio said; he sounded slightly bewildered. "If the complaint goes in front of an impartial magistrate, on what we know at the moment there's a case to answer, and it'll go to trial. By that point, your best bet would be to choose a good jury." He shrugged. "I suppose a straight acquittal would be better than anything that could be interpreted as the case being dropped through undue influence. But there'd be a risk of something going wrong, and then you'd have to arrange for them to be let off on appeal. Apart from anything else, there's the matter of timescale. Under due process, it could drag on for the best part of a year; and they'd be in jail all that time, remember. Bail's never given in rape cases, without conspicuous leaning on the magistrate."

"I suppose they did do it," Basso said.

Cinio interrupted. "That's hardly the point."

"True." Basso sighed. "For two pins I'd leave them there," he said. "Of all the bloody stupid inconsiderate things to do, just when I'm about to embark on a substantial war and the Opposition can't touch me."

"That's not a serious suggestion, is it?" Sentio said nervously. "I'd hate to have to put a positive angle on the First Citizen's sons being tried for

rape.”

Basso frowned. “I don’t know,” he said. “You couldn’t do much better for proof of integrity. What about all the old stories about great statesmen of the past, who executed their own sons for treason?”

Sentio decided not to answer. Cinio said: “People like integrity, but they don’t much like heartless bastards. At best, I think it’d be neutral.”

“Rape’s different,” Basso said. “Very emotive. Treason you could smooth over as an irreconcilable clash of principle, which doesn’t sound at all bad if you pitch it right. Rape’s just nasty. I have to admit,” he went on, “I’m disappointed in them, if it’s true. Sort of thing my late brother-in-law might have done. Right now, I’m inclined to let it go to trial.” He frowned. “I’ve always had an unpleasant suspicion that the twins took after their mother in some respects.” He scratched his head, looked down at his hands. “All right,” he said. “You three go home, and please bear in mind that you were never here. I’ll let you know what I decide.”

He didn’t have long to wait.

“This is splendid,” he said. “All those years when we never saw each other, and now two visits in as many months.”

His sister gave him a patient look. “I’m glad you can still make jokes, Basso. I’d have thought that after this latest business, you might have lost your sense of humour.”

“Please sit down,” he said. “Can I get you anything?”

She remained standing. Naturally, the opposite of what he said. If only it was that simple. “I’ve been expecting something like this, of course.”

“Really? It came as a complete surprise to me.”

“What, that your sons take after their father? Hardly surprising.”

Basso nodded slowly. “That thought has occurred to me a few times over the last two days,” he said. “You see, I’ve often wondered who the twins’ father really was. I suppose this could be taken as circumstantial evidence.”

She gave him a cold stare. “If you try and hush this up,” she said, “I’ll make sure you don’t get away with it.”

“Really?” He smiled encouragingly. “How?”

“Rape is an offence against the majesty of the Invincible Sun,” she said. “I’m sure the Patriarch could be persuaded to take up the issue, if you try and use your influence to get the charges dropped.”

Basso nodded. "I don't think the Patriarch is going to be in any kind of a hurry to pick a fight with me," he said. "I know he's anxious to secure his place in history, but I doubt he'll want to be remembered as the first Patriarch to be executed for conspiracy to murder the First Citizen."

She was perfectly still and silent for several seconds. Then she said: "If you have some sort of hold over the Patriarch, I can have him replaced."

Basso's eyes opened a little bit wider. "Is that right?"

"Oh yes." But, he thought, she always sounds so confident; maybe she could, at that. "Please don't think you can blackmail your way out of this. I intend to see that justice is done."

Basso smiled faintly. "Has it occurred to you that the twins might be innocent?"

"It wasn't their guilt that I had in mind."

"No, I don't suppose it was." Basso frowned. "And if it does go to trial," he said. "I assume you'll try and use the priesthood to manipulate the outcome."

"I feel sorry for you," she said. "You honestly believe that everybody's mind works like yours. As I said just now, I will spare no effort to see that justice is done, by whatever means necessary." She was holding a tiny lace handkerchief in her left hand, he noticed, as though it was some kind of weapon. "I hope you understand that I'm serious about this. I don't make idle threats."

"I never said you did," Basso replied evenly. "Though you could do with reading a good book on tactics. Why warn me in advance of what you've got in mind? If you think I'm going to get the charges dropped, why not let me do it and then come after me with all the priests you can muster? Vestigial sense of fair play, maybe?"

He thought he knew all her expressions, but this one was new. It was disgust, contempt and just a little pity. "You call it fair play. I prefer the word justice. I don't want to catch you out, Basso. I want you, just for once in your worthless life, to watch something coming and not to be able to do anything about it. I want you to realise you're not in control. I think that'd be fair, don't you?"

Basso shrugged. "Only the other day, you just wanted me dead."

"I still do," she said, and left the room.

He couldn't put it off any longer, so he went to see the twins.

They weren't in the general cells. Instead, the guard captain had put them in the tower overlooking the back courtyard. Two hundred years ago, when the building was the headquarters of the Imperial garrison, the tower had been the garrison commander's private quarters. There were worse places.

"Well?" Basso said.

"I swear to you, we didn't do it," Festo said. Basso tried to remember the last time he'd spoken to him—before the Cazar recruits had arrived, but exactly when he couldn't call to mind. "It's got to be some sort of horrible mistake. Honestly."

Basso looked at Pio, but just saw fear. "Please don't lie to me," he said coldly. "You're very bad at it, you always have been. I used to think that was a good thing about you. Now I'm more inclined to think it's because you can't do anything right."

Pio said, "We didn't mean it to happen."

"Really." Basso couldn't be bothered to look at him. "You'll excuse my ignorance, but I didn't think rape was something that happens by accident. I don't want to know," he said, as Festo tried to say something. "I'm really not interested in the details. I wouldn't have thought my opinion of you could get any lower than it is right now, but maybe you two could manage it."

Pio was sitting on the floor, even though there was a perfectly good chair. But he'd always sat on the floor, Basso remembered, like a dog who's not allowed on the furniture. "What's going to happen?" he asked.

Basso looked at a place on the wall exactly between them. "There'll be a hearing before the magistrate," he said. "If he finds there's a case to answer, you'll go to trial."

It wasn't the answer they'd been expecting. "Surely there's something —" Festo started to say.

"Sorry," Basso cut him off. "I'm afraid I owe you both an apology. If I was just a businessman, I could probably bribe you out of this mess. In my position, however, that luxury is denied to me. If I tried anything like that, my enemies would be down on me like a ton of bricks, and you'd almost certainly be convicted, even with the best lawyers in the City. I'm afraid

that because of who I am, you're going to have to stay put and see it through. Any fooling around will just make things worse for you."

For a moment he felt sorry for them; but then, there had been times when he'd felt sorry for rats, when the stable hands blocked up all the holes but one and poured in boiling water. "So that's it, then," Festo said, and it was the first time Basso had heard anything like anger in his son's voice. "They'll put us on trial, and—"

"Shut up," Basso said, "you're upsetting your brother. Nobody's going to hang you."

Probably true, he reflected, on the way back to the House. Two overprivileged young men, drunk, and a barmaid. They think she's just playing hard to get. No real malice in them, gentlemen of the jury; just profound stupidity, thoughtlessness, worthlessness—if those were hanging offences, gentlemen, the City would be pretty empty. There were two alternative punishments for rape, both designed to make sure the offender never did it again. No great loss, Basso couldn't help thinking. After all, some of his best friends were eunuchs.

But there was the question of reasons, the issue that seemed to dominate his life. Why does Basso do what he does? Basso, always so quick to tell you a good reason, always a different reason, depending on who he's talking to. Talking to himself (first sign of madness, they reckoned), what reason would he offer? Because they did it *now*, with the war almost ready, the grand design, Bassano's inheritance; now, of all times, as if they'd thought hard about it and chosen the worst possible moment. Hard to forgive, even if he was fond of them, which he wasn't.

If they were Sentio's kids, or Aelius', or even some off-relation's, that reason wouldn't stand the strain. If they were my sons, he thought; but, probably, they were. Never thought of them like that, though. Always thought of them as *her* sons. Would that be the reason?

Or maybe he simply didn't hold with rape. Just as likely. A disgusting offence, he'd always thought, and what good did it do? Theft he could understand; murder, in certain circumstances. (I've done both, he remembered; it was an uncomfortable thought, though of course he'd never actually broken the law.) Would I really allow the state to geld my own sons because of a principle? He thought about that. Not sure, he found.

There had to be a reason. Maybe, he thought, I'm so used to equivocating that I don't actually know what it is, just that there is one, and it's valid. I could give a convincing reason to somebody else, anybody; just not to myself.

Melsuntha was waiting for him at the House. "Well?" she said. He smiled. She'd learned that turn of phrase from him. Most people who knew him picked it up sooner or later. Then he remembered he'd learned it from Aelius, when he was a boy.

"Get a lawyer," he said, struggling out of his heavy coat. "I want to know what's involved in disowning your sons."

She frowned. "Can you do that?"

"You used to be able to," Basso replied. "Two hundred years ago. I remember reading about it. There was an established procedure. It was a Chancery action, I think. Basically you had to sue yourself in your capacity as the sons' guardian. Find out if it's still legal."

She nodded. "You're thinking of doing it?"

"I like to know what options are available." He sat down, looked at the brandy decanter, decided against it. I'm stupid enough already (one of his sayings) without taking medicine to make me stupider. "Did Furio come by?"

"You just missed him," she said.

"And?"

"They've listed a magistrate," she told him. "Provisionally booked for tomorrow morning, the common sessions. He wanted to know what you intend to do."

"There's a coincidence. *I* want to know what I intend to do." He looked down at his hands: unhelpful, as ever. "What would you do?"

She thought for a moment. "I'd have the girl killed," she said. "She's the key witness; without her, it's all circumstantial—the doctor and the landlord and so on. I'd make it look like suicide, of course. Probably a note, saying she'd accused them falsely and couldn't live with herself."

Basso laughed. "What makes you think a girl like that can read and write?"

She shrugged. "Before her death she went to a public scrivener. He could give evidence at the inquest; that'd be good." She looked at him, challenging him. "It would solve everything."

He nodded. "The scrivener's a nice touch," he said, "and one which, I confess, hadn't occurred to me."

"So you'll do it?"

"No."

She accepted his refusal without the slightest reaction. "In that case, what do you have in mind?"

He sighed, and felt weak. "Let them get on with it," he said. "I guess, all things considered, I could live with Basso the Just."

"It has a certain ring to it," she said.

"Quite. Only," he went on, "I'm a bit fed up with the notion of justice just lately. Justice is all right, but I'm not happy about the company it keeps."

She knew that his sister had been to see him. She understood. "With friends like that," she said, and pushed her hair away from her eyes. "It would mean that she'd won."

Basso nodded. "Yes," he said. "And to be fair, maybe she's due a victory. Am I very selfish for not wanting it to be this one?"

Bassano said: "So what's the plan?"

Basso explained. The reasons he chose to give were political and ethical. He made a good case and took trouble over his choice of words. When he'd finished, Bassano said, "Integrity."

"What about it?"

"Nothing," Bassano replied. "It's a wonderful thing, and I approve of it. But I can't help thinking of all those stories you get in the popular histories, like the ones they made me read when I was a kid. The three Torquati holding the pass against the Five Thousand, or Caelius divorcing his wife. Or Pacatianus, hanging his son for treason."

"Well?"

"Well," Bassano said meekly, "you're supposed to be inspired and eager to go out and give your life for your country. But I always thought, how selfish."

Basso looked at him. "Strange you should use that word."

"Or Carinus," Bassano said. "Didn't he have his son court-martialled for disobeying orders, even though the charge he led won the battle?"

“That was Popilius,” Basso said. “Carinus was the man with the elephants.”

“My mistake. But yes, selfish. I suppose heroes have to be. A hero doesn’t think, if I go into battle against impossible odds and get myself killed, my wife will lose the farm and my kid’ll grow up without a father. It makes you wonder, what sort of a man thinks like that? And I’m prepared to bet, though of course we’ll never know, nine times out of ten there was some other reason.”

“There’s always another reason,” Basso said.

“Of course there is.”

The evening before the magistrates’ hearing, Bassano came home late. He looked very cold and tired, as though he’d been doing a rotten job he hadn’t enjoyed at all. He found Basso in his study, a pile of letters on the desk in front of him, the stopper still in the ink-bottle.

“Just thought you should know,” Bassano said. “The twins are downstairs.”

Basso stared at him. “What have you done?”

Bassano frowned. “It’s like this,” he said, and his voice was harder than Basso had ever heard it before. “The girl went to the magistrate and withdrew the charges.” When Basso tried to interrupt, he held up his hand; Basso knew where that gesture came from. “She explained that some very bad men came to her and said that they wanted her to lay false charges against your sons. If she didn’t cooperate, bad things would happen to her family in the country. The magistrate is considering prosecuting her for perjury. You might want to intervene.”

Basso repeated: “What have you done?”

“Do you want to know?”

“Yes.”

“Fine.” Bassano dropped into a chair and closed his eyes, as though he’d just put down a heavy weight he’d carried a long way. “I went to see her. As you know, she’s a barmaid at the Glorious Victory; pretty girl, I’ve noticed her when I’ve been in there myself. Oddly enough, she remembered me; it’s so rare for one of the fencing school crowd to order just tea or water.”

“And?”

Bassano didn't answer straight away. "I put it to her that having the twins hanged would be justice, but it wouldn't do her any good. Fifteen thousand nomismata, on the other hand..."

Basso stared at him. "You paid her fifteen thousand nomismata."

"Yes." He grinned, and for a split second he was himself again. "Cash. I actually carried it up the back stairs at the Victory, in sacks. Have you any idea how much fifteen thousand nomismata weighs? I had to make two trips, and my back's killing me."

"You haven't got anything like that kind of money."

Bassano nodded. "Borrowed it," he said. "From—I guess you'd call him a loan shark, though he was perfectly civil. I had to mortgage my expectations from my father's estate." Bassano looked at him, then burst out laughing. "Oh for pity's sake, Uncle," he said. "You look like you've been given a really expensive present you don't actually want. Anyway," he went on, crisp and firm, as if he didn't really care what Basso thought, "that's that sorted out. The twins are off the hook, the girl's got enough money to buy a good-sized farm or a couple of decent ships, and we can put all the blame on shadowy conspirators, either Optimates or Mavortines or both. I flatter myself that it's the sort of thing you might have done." He paused, then said, "Why didn't you?"

"I didn't think of it," Basso said quietly.

"I think you should go down and talk to your sons," Bassano said. "They're feeling rather sorry for themselves. I reckon they need a good shouting-at, to get their circulation moving."

Basso stayed where he was. "It's true," he said. "I didn't think of it. Why, do you suppose?"

"Oh, I expect you're losing your touch," Bassano said cheerfully. "Or else you couldn't be bothered to apply your mind."

Basso said; "That's rather harsh, isn't it?"

"Yes," Bassano replied. "And my back hurts, and I need to wash my hands. The banisters at the Victory are covered in grease. I guess it's because they spit-roast so much meat." He paused again, then said, "Well?"

"Thanks," Basso said.

Bassano smiled. "You're welcome," he said. "So, did I pass?"

"It wasn't meant to be a test. You weren't supposed to be involved, even."

“I know. But did I pass?”

Basso nodded. “One of us did,” he said. “And I don’t think it was me.”

“Agreed,” Bassano said. He stretched, like a cat. “You owe me seventeen thousand nomismata.”

“*Seventeen...*”

“Interest,” Bassano explained. “Not a nice man, despite appearances.”

“For crying out loud.” Basso pulled a comic-grief face. “Promise me one thing,” he said. “Next time you want to borrow money, go to the Bank.”

Thirteen

Quite suddenly, the war was ready. Even Basso, who'd got it all drawn out on paper, admitted he was taken by surprise. Two days earlier, all he'd been able to see were huge, insuperable problems. He solved them, fully expecting to find more springing up in their place. But there weren't any. Everybody was where they were supposed to be. The ships were tied up at the dock, all the supplies and equipment loaded. The senior staff had patched up their differences and were actually on speaking terms with each other. There was hay for the horses, bacon and boots and blankets; tents, guy-ropes, tent pegs, mallets; shovels, picks, entrenching tools, surgical instruments, baskets, hayboxes, buckets, bottles, rope, nails, saws, hammers, spokeshaves and rivet sets, butter and candles and horseshoes and lamp wicks and sheeps' wool grease, seven miles of ox backstrap sinew, needles and hobnails, folding chairs and travelling inkwells, a quarter of a ton of best shredded-linen paper, charcoal, cups, plates, eight-gallon pans and fire-irons, mittens and calibrated surveyors' poles and shield covers, a hundredweight of dried oak-apples (for making ink), three Hus-Vesani dictionaries and two million arrows. Twelve thousand Cazars had been paid, hair-cut and shaved, clothed, trained and told what to do and where to sit on the ships. A hundred and forty-seven copies of Standing Orders had been written out and delivered to the officers. The Patriarch had blessed the expedition in Temple, the House had ratified Aelius' command, the Bank had advanced the government an extra quarter-million nomismata, the spear-shaft turners had delivered on time (just) and the last consignment of five thousand shield cover strap buckles had been prised out of the foundry.

People who knew about such things promised a favourable wind for an hour after first light in the morning. Everything, unbelievably, was done and perfect.

Basso gave his nephew two going-away presents. One was a brigandine coat: two thousand carefully shaped spring-tempered steel plates sandwiched between a leather backing and a red velvet outer layer, articulated to allow total freedom of movement. Basso had had it specially made (he'd secretly borrowed several of Bassano's favourite coats for the armourer to take measurements from); it was proof against sword, lance and Cazar composite bow at five paces, and the collar and shoulder seams were double-ruffed and slashed over silk underlay, in the latest City fashion. The other present was the complete *Dialogues* of Scaphio Metellinus, in one volume, written so small that the book fitted easily in the pocket of a standard-issue greatcoat, but still legible by candlelight (Basso tested this for himself). Aelius also had a present for him: a Type Fourteen riding sword (short blade, wide at the hilt, tapering to a keen point, broad double fuller; best watered Auxentine steel). Melsuntha gave him a fur-lined hat reinforced with horn plates. His mother gave him a folding triptych showing the three evolutions of the Invincible Sun, inscribed with appropriate verses from the Book of Admonitions.

"What I was hoping for," Bassano said, "was five pairs of thick wool socks. But it's the thought that counts."

They rode together in Basso's closed coach as far as the bottom of Portway, and neither of them said anything all the way. As Bassano opened the coach door, Basso said, "Well, look after yourself."

"You too," Bassano said, and walked away.

Basso drove to meet the House representatives, who were there for the official launch ceremony. Basso kept his speech short and trite, and formally handed Aelius his commission. Bassano stood behind Aelius and just to his left; he looked sombre, and Basso could see he was trying very hard not to shiver in the cold. Some priest said a prayer. To conclude the performance, Basso had to grab Aelius by the neck, shake him and say, "Come back victorious or not at all." It was traditional (Glabrius had said it to the younger Passienus at the siege of Luma, six hundred years ago), but Basso couldn't help thinking that Aelius always seemed to be on the thick end of Vesani military ritual.

“Look after him,” he whispered.

Aelius nodded. “It’ll be fine,” he replied.

Then Aelius and his party boarded the flagship, a band started playing noisy music, sails were unfurled and slowly filled, anchors were raised and the ships started to wallow lazily away from the edge of the City.

It was considered to be bad luck for the First Citizen to watch the fleet out of harbour, so Basso left the rostrum, went back to his coach, drove home and got on with some work.

Tragazes had asked for an appointment.

“As yet,” he said, “there’s really nothing to worry about. However, if we continue to lend to the Treasury on this scale, in six months’ time it’s likely that we will technically be overcommitted.”

“Technically,” Basso repeated. “What does that mean?”

Tragazes explained that according to best practice, the Bank should not lend more than four times its reserve. Should that limit be exceeded, existing loans should be called in to maintain liquidity, or assets should be liquidated to provide cash in hand. Technically.

“But we’re lending to the government,” Basso pointed out, “and the government is me. Besides, if we reach the point where the government’s forced to default on its borrowing, financial ruin will be the least of our problems. We’ll be more concerned about getting out of town before we’re lynched by the hunger rioters in the streets.”

Tragazes didn’t react at all. “I have an obligation under standing rules of procedure to bring the matter to your attention,” he said.

“Well, you’ve done that,” Basso replied. “Thanks. Anything else?”

Tragazes looked down at the papers in his lap. “The most recent loan to the Treasury is secured against the government’s projected income from sale of war plunder, captured enemy arms and equipment, livestock and personal chattels,” he said. “It’s incumbent on me to point out that under the Bank’s constitution, these commodities do not represent adequate collateral for a loan exceeding fifty thousand nomismata, since they are both uncertain as to value and also potential, as opposed to being assets in hand.”

Basso waited. Then he said, “And?”

Tragazes didn’t quite shrug. “It’s my duty to mention it to you.”

“Right. Any other business?”

Another glance at the crib sheet. “There are unsettling rumours concerning the Hope and Courage trading partnership,” he said. “We have reason to believe that four of their ships have been impounded by the Praxinoan authorities for excise violations. If this is true, it’s likely that the Hope and Courage will not be able to make its periodic interest payment on time. They are indebted to us in the sum of nine hundred thousand nomismata.”

Basso shook his head. “They’re good for the money,” he replied. “It’s all secured on the Naevius family estates; vineyards, mostly, out east.”

“I was about to draw your attention to the reports of predicted crop failures—”

“It’ll be fine,” Basso interrupted. “If they can’t make the payment on time, reschedule. Antigonus used to say, old money’s worth twice as much as new money in hard times. They aren’t going anywhere.”

“In that case,” Tragazes said, “thank you for your time.”

(On the other hand, Basso told himself, as Tragazes closed the door behind him, he’s a very efficient chief clerk, and I pay him to be annoyingly fussy. Means I don’t have to do it myself.)

For the rest of the day, he found that he was taking rather longer than usual to plough through the routine work. He’d always had the gift of ferociously intense concentration, which brought with it the ability to see the simple question at the heart of the complex and apparently insuperable problem; now he caught himself reading paragraphs two or three times and still having their meaning bounce off him, like stones off a shield. He found the experience disturbing, and decided to run away from it.

Since the first assassination attempt, he’d been under strict orders from Aelius, his cabinet and the House not to go anywhere in public without the minimum prescribed number of suitably trained and equipped bodyguards. The House had even passed a law (the Safety of the First Citizen Act), any breach of which would render him liable to official censure and a small fine. Naturally, Basso respected the law, unless it was absolutely inconvenient.

He’d noticed that one of the grooms in the main stable was in the habit of leaving his coat and hat hanging from a nail in the back of the tack-room door. It was about the time when the horses would be getting their evening

feed. He opened his study door very quietly, stopped to listen, then crept down the back stairs and out into the east yard. He located the grooms by the sounds of buckets on stone and voices, then walked quickly across the yard and into the tack room. The coat and hat were where he'd expected to find them. He put on the coat (slightly too long for him, and tight across the shoulders), crammed his head into the hat and pulled the brim down; thought better of it (only suspicious characters walk around with their hat brims pulled down, unless it's raining); in case he forgot later, he put three silver solidi in the coat pocket, by way of rent.

Nobody about. He headed across the main courtyard, then remembered that a groom wouldn't come and go by the front gate. He doubled back, hoping nobody was watching.

He couldn't go via the back yard, because the owner of the coat might see it walking past and wonder why. So he slipped into the feed store, opened the west-facing window, scrambled through it and dropped down into the laundry yard. Using the hung-out washing as cover, he took a diagonal line, which left him only five yards of exposed ground to cover before he reached the side door of the kitchens. He was taking a risk, he knew; the stable staff were discouraged from using the kitchens as a short cut to the back gate, and the cook was inclined to savage offenders. But she wasn't there. A kitchen maid said something as he hurried past, but he pretended he was deaf. A quick twist of a handle, and he was out into the street.

(That's bad, he thought. Back gate not locked, and I doubt whether that slip of a girl could fight off a band of heavily armed assassins. I can give Aelius' security man hell about that later. The thought pleased him, and he smiled.)

Having won his freedom, he wasn't quite sure what he wanted to do with it. Traditionally, he knew, the good prince slips out of the palace in disguise in order to go among the people, find out about their concerns and grievances and listen to what they really think about him. But he wasn't in the mood for anything like that. What he really wanted, he realised, was a nice civilised evening out, like he hadn't had for fifteen years—a play at the Blue Court (a comedy, for choice), followed by dinner at the Parrot, if it was still there, a nightcap in the Virtue Triumphant, and home to bed by midnight. But he wasn't exactly dressed for that; nor (he discovered,

checking his pockets) had he brought enough money. So he decided to go to the dog races instead.

Basso's views on gambling were well known. It was the only form of charity, he used to say, where you give money to the rich, the greedy, the disproportionately fortunate and the selfish. Tonight, however, he felt the urge to try out his luck, just to make sure it still worked. He put half a solidus on Divine Retribution at six to one. The resulting three solidi went on Arrogance Confounded at four to one, which meant he had a whole nomisma to bet on Victory, at seven to one. There was a five-nomismata limit, so he pocketed two nomismata and bet the full five on a double for the last two races: Outrageous Fortune at three to one, followed by Just Deserts at nine to one.

"Are you sure?" the bookmaker asked.

"Yes."

The bookmaker shrugged. "Suit yourself," he said, and handed him the small bone disc that recorded the bet. "You'd be better off buying yourself a new coat, but it's up to you."

One hundred and thirty-five nomismata. Or, to be precise, one hundred and thirty-two nomismata and thirty-six solidi, since the bookmakers' ring didn't have enough gold coin. It was, the bookmaker who paid him said, the biggest win in living memory; he almost sounded proud, though probably he was just being brave.

"You want to be careful," he added, "going home with that much money on you."

A fair point, Basso reflected, and one that hadn't occurred to him. Maybe it was just his imagination, but he had an idea people were looking at him. If he got stabbed to death in an alley on his way back to the Severus house, it would be a wonderful parable for the ambivalence of fortune; also, a bloody stupid way to die.

He considered the bookmaker, who was looking very sad. "Here's an idea," he said. "I've got more money than I can safely carry, and you've just been cleaned out of your working capital. Yes?"

The bookmaker gave him a nasty look and nodded.

"So," Basso went on, "what would you say to selling me... what, a quarter share in your business?"

"Get stuffed," said the bookmaker.

“Fine,” Basso said. “Your choice. A hundred and thirty-five nomismata’s just about to walk out of your life for ever, but that’s entirely up to you.”

The bookmaker scowled at him. “I’d have to talk to my partners,” he said.

“No hurry,” Basso said.

He made a point of staying near the portico, where the lighting was good and there was a fair crowd, milling about eating and drinking. He bought himself a beef pancake and a pint of beer, and discovered that his tastes had changed since he was sixteen.

“A tenth,” the bookmaker said.

Basso shrugged. “I ought to ask to see the books.”

“There aren’t any books. What do you take us for, the Charity & Social?”

Basso smiled. “Private joke,” he said. “All right. But it’ll have to be written up properly, with a deed and everything.”

The partners sighed. “Fine,” one of them said. “First thing in the morning.”

Basso grinned. “Like hell,” he said. “We’ll go and wake up a lawyer.”

When the lawyer asked his name and he replied, he was greeted with both suspicion and scepticism. They didn’t believe he was Prince Bassano (*prince*, he noted, with amusement and interest); for one thing, he was too old, and for another, Bassano was off with the army, at the war.

“Well of course I’m not actually him,” Basso replied. “I’m his steward. He wanted to try his luck at the dog races, so he sent me along. All right?”

Whatever, the partners said, and the lawyer retired to write up the agreement, leaving Basso and the partners in the cold waiting room. At first, there was a sullen silence. Then one of the bookmakers asked: “Is that right, then? You work for the prince?”

Basso nodded.

“So what’s he like, then? Really.”

“He’s all right,” Basso said. “Why, what do you reckon to him?”

The partners looked at each other. One of them said, “Bit of a chip off the old block, if you ask me.”

Basso nodded. “Is that a good thing?”

Someone laughed. "Tell you what," he said. "If he's got some of his uncle's luck, we could do with it in the business."

"Wonderful thing, luck," Basso agreed. "So you think he takes after the old man?"

"Don't really know," another one said. "Like, we only know what we're told, and that's probably a pack of lies. He seems all right. Bit of a toff, but then, aren't they all?"

Basso reminded himself that he wasn't going to be the traditional good prince tonight, and changed the subject. Prince, though: the word seemed to be following him around, like a butcher's dog. So he talked about the war. The bookmakers all thought it was a good idea and likely to succeed; ten to one on, they were offering.

The lawyer came in with the document. They signed, with the lawyer's red-eyed housekeeper as witness. Two solidi, for an hour's work. We're in the wrong business, the bookmakers said.

"I'll hang on to this," Basso said, folding the document and shoving it in his pocket. "Well, pleasure doing business with you, gentlemen," he said. "I'm sure we'll be seeing more of each other in future."

The partners' faces showed no trace of expression of any kind. "Of course," Basso went on, "there'll have to be a few changes in the way you do things. For a start, you'll have to start keeping books."

A meaningful silence. Then one of them said, "We can do that."

"And of course," Basso went on, "you'll cook them, you wouldn't be human if you didn't. And that's fine, so long as you're not greedy. A little imagination is one thing, but I don't like being taken for an idiot."

The next silence was distinctly awkward. Basso went on: "For one thing," he said, "if you mess with the Severus family, you might get rather more luck than you can handle; the other sort, I mean. You could trip and fall under a cart, or your house might burn down. Even worse, some bastard could report you to the Revenue. Please bear in mind, we're practically the government. So accurate and conscientious accounting is in your best interests as well as ours."

They looked at him, very sad. He wished them goodnight, and they parted on the corner of Portway and the Tannery; the bookmakers went downtown, while Basso headed north. There were drunks in Portway—amiable enough, laughing and singing a song he knew about but had never

actually heard: about the First Citizen and his beautiful Mavortine wife. The tune was so catchy he found himself humming it under his breath as he walked up to the gate of the Severus house.

One thing he hadn't given much thought to was how he was going to get back in. There were, of course, sentries posted at all the gates during the night. When he was a boy, there was a good way in through the charcoal hatch, but he'd been smaller then; also, he seemed to remember Aelius' security man saying something about it. Quite possibly he'd booby-trapped it with nine-inch nails.

Nothing for it, therefore, but to walk up to the sentries on the main gate.

"Where do you think you're going?" they said.

"It's all right," he answered. "This is my house. I'm Bassianus Severus."

"Course you are," said a sentry, moving his halberd to block the way.

"And I'm the Czar of bloody Permia. Now get lost, or we'll do you for loitering."

Oh, Basso thought. "No, really," he said, taking off his hat. He started to step forward, so his face would be in the light from the all-night lantern, but the sentry swung up his halberd and pressed the shaft against his windpipe. "Suit yourself," the sentry said. "You're under arrest."

The other sentry was behind him, twisting his arms behind his back. It was done so quickly that he had no time to react. "I'll take him down the station," said the sentry he couldn't see. "He can sleep it off in the cells."

Call the porter, he'll identify me, Basso was about to say; but as soon as he opened his mouth, the sentry rabbit-punched him in the kidneys, and the words were suddenly too big to get out. He discovered that it's possible to hurt and walk at the same time, provided someone pushes you all the way.

Just after dawn, the duty sergeant came and let him out. His back hurt from sleeping on a stone floor, and he didn't feel like trying to prove his identity. Instead, he walked to the House, dumping the coat and the hat just before he got there. He walked up to the porter's lodge.

"Do you know who I am?" he demanded.

"Of course, sir," the porter said. "They've been looking for you. Tearing the City apart."

"Is that right?" Basso said. "Well, you found me. Now get my carriage so I can go home."

A lot of people were respectfully furious with him for the rest of the day.

The first letter from Aelius;

Landed; more resistance than anticipated, dealt with successfully, losses trivial. Establishing fortified camp at Bilemvasia. Am leaving for Voroe to begin second front.

And that was all. Two agonising days of waiting; then a letter from Bassano, brought in on the first returning cargo ship:

Well, here we are.

The trip out was pretty miserable—cold and wet, it rained nearly all the way and the ships got thrown about a lot. The captain was worried at one stage, tried to talk Aelius into turning back, putting in to Voroe; might as well have been talking to a brick wall. Made landfall (see, I'm learning the technical terms) mid-afternoon, not dawn as we'd hoped. Someone must've seen us floundering about in the gulf, because there was a fair-sized army waiting on the beach. Aelius reckons somewhere in the region of seven thousand, so presumably the local tribal militia. Occurs to me to wonder how they knew we were hostile; the sheer number of ships, maybe, too many for a trading convoy. Still, how long does it take to convene the tribal militia? Maybe not all that long; someone turns up on a horse and yells, "To arms!" or words to that effect; run back to the huts, grab a shield and a spear, off you go. Then again: time elapsed between first sighting of fleet in bay and army drawn up on beach, two hours? If we knew more about these people, it'd be a great help.

One day here and already I'm blasé about it all. A fair-sized army. Well, to me, clinging to the rail as we lurched in on a tearaway wave, it was absolutely terrifying. A beachful of people, and all of them wanting to kill me. All I could think was, oh God, what are we doing? let's get away from here while we still can; then realised the wind was blowing us straight at the beach; couldn't turn back even if we wanted to; this ghastly thing was going to happen, and nothing could be done about it. Wisely, kept all such thoughts to myself, stayed on ship, didn't get under people's feet. Watched battle.

You get used to it. From where I was, I could only see a little slice of the action. I saw what looked like a fence, all pretty colours; figured out that what I was looking at was the Mavortine shield wall, as described in the briefing notes. Too far away to see people as people—just dots. I guess it's easier, on balance, if it's dots.

I was thinking, that's a hell of a lot of dots, how on earth are we going to get off the ships without being wiped out? Then there was this creaking, banging, whistling all round me. Aelius' ship-mounted artillery. I'd clean forgotten about it. I was below deck all morning, feeling like death because of the ship dancing about. While I wasn't there to see, they must've dug out the crates, assembled the machines from the kits of parts and set them up on deck; just like that, easiest thing in the world. Shows how observant I am, I hadn't even noticed they were there until they started going off all around me.

Nasty shock for the Mavortines. Suddenly, the air's full of flying stone balls a foot across. Much too far away for me to see what happened when one of those things landed. I dread to think. The noise was enough to turn my stomach; all that strength and power. As a stone goes over, you can hear it spin—swish-swish-swish, only the sound changes the further away it gets. Nearest comparison is the sound of people whispering about you behind your back. I was scared stiff, and they weren't even aimed at me.

I guess we must've picked up the range pretty well; the shield wall moved back up the beach, and we were coming right in close. We dropped anchor just short of running aground, and then people started jumping into the water. Orderly lines, queuing up, then over the side and splash! I guess they did it because the sergeants told them to. You wouldn't have got me to do it, not even with a cattle-prod.

First ashore were the archers; they formed up in line and laid down covering fire. Air still full of swish-swishing stones; Mavortines not doing much, just standing there, dots. Disembark the heavy infantry. Loads of men splashing about in the water, couldn't hear yourself think, everybody soaked to the skin, everybody shouting. Aelius went ashore with the heavy infantry.

It's easy to say the Mavortines were dumb or chicken. They let us land unopposed, for fear of the artillery barrage. Bad mistake. What they should have done was ignore the head-sized solid granite hailstones, never mind if a few dozen men get pulped; be there to fight 'em in the water, don't let a

single one set foot on the sand. I suppose that's the difference between soldiers and people.

As it was, they got the worst of it both ways. By the time they charged down the beach at us, we'd got three ranks of heavy infantry formed up, with a skirmisher screen and archery batteries in the centre and on the wings; artillery still pounding away; they tried to charge home, got within fifty yards, stopped. Men behind still running in, men at the front standing still or trying to turn back. Complete mess. Aelius orders the advance. Up the beach go our three lines, nice steady walk, a thousand men keeping in step; at twenty yards, present arms; at fifteen yards, lock shields. Then they just walked into the Mavortines, like walking into a cornfield.

It took no time at all; maybe half a minute. Then the Mavortines were running like hell up the beach, our lot still walking at the prescribed pace (they hadn't slowed down, as far as I could tell)—no wild pursuit, just the same determined stroll, walking over the dead and the dying. At some point I noticed the artillery had stopped. Two hundred and fifty yards up the beach, the line halts. No Mavortines in sight anywhere, unless you count a lot of dots on the beach—mess, litter, waiting to be cleared away, like Portway Square after New Year's.

Hell of a thing. Aelius said we lost three men dead, seventeen wounded; killed between three hundred and three hundred and fifty Mavortines. Couldn't be fussed to count; left them lying, for the tide and the gulls.

When I was absolutely certain it was perfectly safe, I put on my wonderful brigandine (thanks for that, by the way; you have no idea how amazingly reassuring it is to be wearing armour when violence is going on—so much better than socks), jumped in the sea, got very wet, squelched up onto the beach. Tried very hard not to look at the dead bodies. Logically, it shouldn't matter a damn. You're just as killed by a one-inch arrowhead as you are by a foot-diameter stone ball. Arrow hits you in the face or the neck, you die instantly. Actually, arrows much scarier—can hit you in the guts and you take hours to die. Stone ball turns you to mush; can't get more instant than that. But I can perfectly well understand why the Mavortines were freaked out by the artillery, something capable of doing that to a human body. Aelius agrees, by the way, only he calls it morale effect.

We thought they might come back while we were unloading the ships, but they didn't. Had the beach to ourselves. All essentials unloaded by

nightfall; sectional ramparts unshipped, assembled and in place; sentries posted, campfires lit, supper cooking. An hour ago, it was a hundred and fifty acres of sand; now it's a small but prosperous town. Amazing.

I imagine this sort of thing's all in a day's work for General Cowshit. Having nothing better to do, I looked up opposed landings in the Book. It said: if possible, lay down an artillery barrage; land archers first, followed by heavy infantry; seek to engage enemy at earliest opportunity. Which is exactly what he did. I imagine he thought: well, done that, tick it off the list and get on with the next stage. To me—well, who gives a damn? The thought that was uppermost in my mind, even uppermost than Oh shit, this is scary, was: what am I (Bassianus Arcadius Severus Licinius) doing here? What possible function? Took me a long time to figure that one out. I guess I'm here to report back; which I'm doing.

That's about it. Tomorrow we advance, with a view to taking Bilemvasia, wherever and whatever the hell it is. I can't help thinking, this is a bloody odd way for human beings to spend their time.

*Cordially,
Bassano.*

Basso reported to the House. He told them that the expeditionary force led by General Aelius had landed at Bilemvasia. They had met with strong resistance, estimated at seven to ten thousand, who were routed with ease. Estimates put enemy losses at five hundred dead, at a cost of only three Vesani. He called for a vote of thanks and a day of national thanksgiving. Passed unanimously.

Arriving back at the Severus house, he got out of the coach, then stopped and looked hard at one of the sentries.

"Excuse me," he said, "but aren't you the Czar of Permia?"

The sentry looked at him and went white. Basso smiled at him, and went inside.

From Bassano;

I was right. Been here a week, feel like I've been doing this my whole life.

News first. We have occupied and are fortifying Bilemvasia. News ends.

We just walked in. Place was empty. Really strange. All the doors of the houses were open, like they were in such a hurry to leave they didn't have time to close them. Or maybe it's one of those places where you never close your door. No, scrub that. You'd have to, because of the cold, and the pig would get out.

No exaggeration. The pig lives in the house—hut—with the family. A man I was talking to who reckons he knows a bit about these people said, well, of course. The pig's more important than any other member of the household; it's going to see you through the winter. Chickens not quite so important, so they live in a coop out back. The cows stay out all year, which is hard to believe.

God, these people are poor. Define poor. In any society, I guess poor means not having as much as somebody else. For all I know, the people of Bilemvasia are the bloated aristocracy of Mavortis, grinding the faces of the rural proletariat. But they basically live in one room, and they don't seem to have got around to inventing the chimney yet. There's a hole in the roof, and smoke finds its own way out. Eventually. Sanitation means please don't shit in the well. Mostly I tend to think of them as a different species, a kind of two-legged upright animal, until I remember that Melsuntha came from here and presumably once lived like this.

Mostly, I guess, they're just different. Hark at me, by the way, the world's leading authority. I haven't seen a (live) Mavortine yet, let alone spoken to one. But they think differently; sort of sideways, if that makes any sense. We've been having all sorts of fun interrogating hapless locals who didn't run away fast enough. We can understand the language, but not what they're saying.

Give you an example. Trying to find out where the enemy army is; the sort of thing you do if you're in a war. Hopeless. It's not that they won't tell us; they can't. We kept asking them: is the enemy at Periboule? Is the enemy anywhere near Mensicertha? They look at us and say, Sorry, where? Turns out that every tribe and sect has different names for all the places. Two villages on either side of a river: one village calls it one thing, the other calls it something else, and the killer is, they don't know (or care) what the other lot call it, because they never talk to the other lot. I can't begin to imagine how a society functions like that; well, it does and it doesn't. When one village absolutely has no choice but to discuss geography with its

neighbour, they'll say, the river that comes down from the big mountain due north of here; and the neighbour replies, you mean the river that comes down from the big mountain due south of where we comes from?

It would've been nice if someone had thought to mention this, and other similar quirks of behaviour, before we got here. But that's another Mavortine thing. They don't tell you things unless you ask. Really. Ask them an unambiguous question and press a red-hot iron to the soles of their feet, and you get a straight answer. But volunteer information? Simply not done. I guess the rationale is: if you're from round here, you already know. If you're not from around here, screw you.

Anyway; we caught some kid who used to live here, and he said the Bilemvasians have gone up the mountain and won't come down again till we've gone. We have no interest whatever in chasing after them. The mountain is not a place you'd want to go. It's all narrow passes and ravines, just right for ambushes; which is basically the Mavortine way of war. On the other hand, there's nothing to eat up there and precious little water, so the idea is to stay here and starve them out. Won't be long, we argue, before their cattle have grazed off what little pasture there is and drunk all the water; and then they'll be back, and we can negotiate a civilised surrender. I can't help thinking it may not be as simple as that. But for now, they're no bother. The army that met us on the beach is nowhere to be seen; we've sent out scouts, mostly Hus (they arrived the day after we did; very efficient), and they haven't come across more than one or two straggling civilians. Something the size of an army's too big to hide, even in the mountains. This fits in with what we've been told: the militia will come together for a day or so, to fight a battle, but then they just wander off, even if they're winning. I guess that's why Mavortine workers back home have such a lousy reputation for being unreliable. The idea that you have to come in to work every single day must be hard for them to get their heads around.

This is a miserable place, the last place on earth, but I have to confess, it's utterly fascinating. Living in the City, you sort of come to believe that everybody's really the same; and they're not. Some people are just so different, it's hard to imagine that we're the same species. Thinking about it, I guess that Mavortines in the City just want to blot it all out, forget all about home, pretend they were never here—

(“Quite right,” Melsuntha said. “And we do. I’d forgotten about the place names, until I read it here.”)

—which is understandable, I suppose. Also, the Mavortines seem to have the knack of deliberately forgetting—when someone dies, for instance, the family just forgets about them, which I guess saves on grief and heartbreak. Is that a trick worth learning, do you think? Not sure. There does seem to be a sort of twisted, Mavortine-specific, survival-oriented logic to everything they do, but they’re so different, none of it would be any use anywhere else. Like that country up north somewhere where they use three-foot iron bars for money.

I think that conquering this country will be a piece of cake. Keeping it conquered may well be a different matter entirely. It all depends—this is going to sound strange—it all depends on whether they notice us or not. If we build forts and stay inside them and only come out now and then to rob, burn and kill indiscriminately, it won’t be long before we’re accepted as just another nasty fact of life (and there are so many of those that one more would be neither here nor there). If we try and change them, on the other hand, there may well be hell to pay. I don’t know. We’ll have to wait and see.

Aelius is up north, of course; you’ll probably have heard from him, we haven’t. Brigadier General Glycerius is in charge here, and he’s doing a fine job (I promised him I’d tell you that, and it’s true). He’s a good chess player, but very sad about the total lack of local women. He’s understandably reluctant to discuss his plans with me, but I gather he’s getting ready to march on Bous, which is the town (for want of a better word) belonging to the next big tribe. It’s called Bous on the map; what its name will be when we get there is anybody’s guess. Like it matters.

I’ve read the first three books of the Dialogues; enjoying them very much, but it’s like a voice from another world. If someone told me that water flows uphill here, and the sun rises in the west, I’d be inclined to believe it.

*Cordially,
Bassano.*

* * *

Segimerus, the famous philosopher, turned up unexpectedly in the City. He hadn't been heard of for three years (rumour had it that he'd spent the time alone in a cave on a mountain top; Basso, who found his work abstruse and annoying, reckoned it was more likely he'd been in prison somewhere), and once word had got about, the inn where he was staying was besieged by his admirers. One of the stable hands managed to fight his way through the blockade, and arrived at the House with a letter for the First Citizen.

"I suppose I'm honoured," Basso said, scowling at it. "The great man wants to see me. My lucky day."

Cinio, who'd been secretly wondering about the chances of getting his copy of *The Mist of Reason* signed, said: "It'd be fantastic publicity. Segimerus comes all the way here just to consult the First Citizen. You could appear on the balcony together."

Basso mouthed something under his breath. "Well," he said, "Bassano likes his stuff. All right, fit him in somewhere. And find out if he actually wants anything, apart from lunch."

Yes, he did want something, but no, he wasn't going to tell anybody but Bassianus Severus, in person. "Typical," Basso muttered, when they told him. "An overrated hack doing his wizard impersonation. So much more important than simply running the country."

Segimerus didn't look anything like what Basso had expected. He was quite young, maybe thirty-four or five; short-haired, clean-shaven, neatly and conventionally dressed, with rather a long nose and soft, dull grey eyes. Apparently he'd signed Cinio's book without a murmur.

"I'd like a passport," Segimerus said, "so I can go to Mavortis. I gather that since I'm a civilian, I need a travel warrant signed by you personally."

Basso looked at him hard. "Why on earth would you want to go there? There's a war on."

Segimerus nodded. "That's why," he said. "War is the single most significant human activity, and I've never actually seen one. So writing about war would be like writing a guidebook to somewhere you've never been."

"Which is what most guidebook writers do," Basso said. "But I take your point. On the other hand..."

Segimerus smiled. "I know," he said. "You can't guarantee my safety, it'd be a distraction and you'd have to tie up personnel who have more than

enough work already.”

“Yes.”

“Then it’s quite simple,” Segimerus said. “I’ll go entirely at my own risk, and you don’t have to provide me with a bodyguard. I can pay my own way, and I’m happy to sleep on a blanket on the ground.”

“Not quite as simple as that,” Basso replied. “First, it’s all very well saying you don’t want guards, but if anything happens to you while you’re there, I’ll get lynched. Second, the only ships going there are Vesani naval vessels, and I know you’ll happily sleep in a lifeboat, but I can’t let you, or I’ll look a fool. Paying your own way is meaningless—Mavortis doesn’t have a functioning economy, so there’s nobody you could buy anything from. Sorry, but you go as an honoured guest of the Republic or not at all, and the latter would be so much more convenient for us.”

Segimerus nodded slowly. “I do understand,” he said. “It’s an awful lot to ask, I know, and you’re a very busy man. But I do believe it’s important that I go there. I think I can be of use.”

“Really,” Basso said. “What as?”

“I imagine you might need interpreters,” Segimerus replied.

“You know Mavortine?”

“Not yet. But I should be able to learn it in a fortnight; that’s how long it generally takes me. Probably less in this case, since Mavortine is part of the Pelasgian group of languages, and I already know Blemmyate and Hus.”

Basso frowned. “You know Blemmyate?”

“I should do. I was born there. Of course,” Segimerus went on, “my degree, from the University of Gopessus, was in civil engineering, and I did work for five years on bridge-building projects in Auxentia. I’m sure you have translators, but how many of them can explain to a Mavortine work gang how to build a bridge?”

Basso nodded slowly. “You call yourself a philosopher,” he said.

“Actually, I prefer to think of myself as a scientist,” Segimerus said. “But the difference is largely semantic.”

“Indeed.” Basso picked up his inkwell and moved it from one side of the desk to the other. “And you want to go to Mavortis to study the war, and you’re prepared to get your hands dirty working for us, if that’s what it takes.”

“That’s right.”

“How about observer effect?” Basso said. “As a scientist...”

Segimerus smiled at him—the happy beam of someone meeting a compatriot in a strange land. “Precisely,” he said. “I’ve been worrying about that myself. If I participate, how can I be an impartial observer? You’ve read Choniates, I take it.”

Basso shook his head. “Just a summary,” he replied. “In *Mist of Reason*. I guess I should’ve gone back to the original source, but I couldn’t be bothered, so I thought I’d take your word for it.”

Segimerus nodded eagerly. “That’s why I want to go,” he said. “To test the effect on myself, if you like. I think it’s important, and nobody’s ever done it before. It could have implications for the very foundation of scientific method.”

Basso was grinning. “So that’s the reason,” he said.

“Yes.”

“One of the reasons.” Basso laughed. “To be perfectly honest with you,” he said, “I don’t like your books and I don’t accept your conclusions. But my nephew thinks highly of you, and he’s the brains in our family.” He made a show of thinking about it, then said: “Come back in ten days and explain to my wife in Mavortine how you’d go about building a breakwater in Bilemvasia Sound. If she says you can go, you can have your travel warrant. Fair enough?”

Segimerus looked delighted. “Thank you,” he said. “I’m extremely grateful.” He stood up to leave. Basso let him get as far as the door, then said, “You’re really from Blemmya?”

“Yes.”

“What’s it like?”

“Horrible,” Segimerus said. “That’s why I left.”

“Where have you been, the last three years?”

“In prison,” Segimerus replied. “I was arrested for propagating Dobunnius’ theory of rotation of the stars in Scleria. I spent eighteen months breaking rocks in a quarry. Fascinating experience, and a unique chance to study stratification in rock formations.”

Basso nodded. “A stroke of luck, then, really.”

“Quite so. Thank you again, First Citizen.”

An ambassador arrived from his divine majesty the Emperor Timoleon, equal of the prophets, viceroy of Heaven. He was five feet tall, with a completely hairless head, a square-cut white beard and skin the colour of rust; all his clothes were purple, with gold-wire embroidery at the cuffs and hems, and everywhere he went he carried a hooded peregrine falcon (whether it was always the same bird or whether he had several of them, nobody liked to ask). He was the first Easterner to appear in the City for seventy years, and the first Imperial diplomat to make an official visit since the Republic broke away from the Empire over two centuries ago. He brought with him a number of gifts, lavish and rather bewildering: an elephant, two white bears, a dozen parakeets (“Thoughtful of him to bring lunch,” Basso observed); a life-size clockwork silver-gilt dancing girl; a musical instrument the size of a small shed—you poured fifty gallons of water down a funnel at the top, and it made a sound like trumpets; a gold tiara encrusted with rubies; a mechanical chamber pot with a cistern that flushed its contents away down a pipe when you pushed down on a lever; fifty square yards of tapestries with mildly pornographic designs; a box of brown tubers, a bit like rusty apples, allegedly edible; a rather inferior horn-and-sinew bow and a huge jar of pickled seaweed. The ambassador (he refused to give his name; since he was merely his emperor’s spokesman, he didn’t need one) was attended by fifty eunuchs, a hundred men-at-arms and twenty-five choristers, who sang his official statements in plainsong.

“I have no idea,” Sentio said wretchedly. “There just isn’t a building in this town big enough.”

Basso rubbed his forehead. “Well,” he said, “we can park the secretarial staff in the Goldsmiths’ Hall, maybe. And the soldiers’ll just have to rough it in barracks.”

Furio, the home affairs secretary, cleared his throat. “With respect,” he said, “the lowest-ranking bodyguard is a Domestic of the Bedchamber, which is sort of like an earl. He’s got estates bigger than the Cazar Peninsula. Asking them to sleep in wooden huts would basically be a declaration of war.”

Basso sighed. “What about the choir?”

“Noble families,” Furio confirmed. “Knights of Equity or Counts of the Stable. The eunuchs aren’t aristocracy as such, but the ambassador won’t let

them out of his sight.” He was keeping a straight face, but his hands were twitching. “There is one building.”

Basso scowled at him. “First, it’s too small,” he said. “Second, what am I supposed to do? Go and stay with my sister for a month?”

“I wasn’t thinking of here,” Furio said. “What I had in mind was the House.”

Basso stared at him; the rest of the cabinet managed to convey, without words, that they had no idea who this strange man was. “You want me to tell the representatives of the Vesani people that we’re going to have to meet in some barn somewhere so the Emperor’s errand boy’s elephant-handlers can doss down in the House. I don’t think so.”

“I think it’s a deliberate ploy to embarrass us,” Cinio said. “They must know—”

“Oh, I doubt it,” Basso said. “To impress us, maybe, but I don’t suppose they’re that well informed. Everything the Empire knows about us will be at least two hundred years out of date.” He thought for a moment, then said, “Where are they now?”

Frontino, the cabinet secretary, said, “In a sort of tented city, out back of the Westgate.”

Basso narrowed his eyes. “You mean they’re camping out on the racetrack.”

Frontino nodded. “It’s the only open space big enough.”

“Fine,” Basso said. “They can stay there, and let’s hope it doesn’t rain. By the way,” he added, “is there any particular reason why all this came as a sudden shock? We’ve known they were coming for a week.”

“They didn’t see fit to mention their accommodation requirements,” Furio mumbled. “We assumed...”

“Yes,” Basso said. “Anyway, that’s what we’ll do. Make up some story.” He scowled at the desk, then said, “We consulted the auguries, and it would be inauspicious for them to enter the City at this time. They think we’re barbarians, so they’ll believe it if we imply we’re hopelessly superstitious.”

Furio nodded gratefully. Sentio said: “If they can’t come inside the City...”

“Hire all the posh tents you can find,” Basso said. “We’ll have our own tented city right next to theirs. Call them pavilions, it sounds better. Suggest

that it's a quaint throwback to our nomadic past."

"We haven't got a nomadic—"

"They won't know that. Right," Basso went on, "what else did you get out of their protocol officer?"

"Food," Furio said. "They're extremely fussy about what they eat."

"You amaze me. Go on."

"Basically," Furio said, "it's lightly steamed white fish, lentils, carrots, bread and green tea."

"And?"

"That's it." Furio shrugged. "Apparently, the higher up the social scale you go, the plainer and more miserable the food you eat. The Emperor lives on coarse wheat bread, unpeeled fruit and water."

"Water."

Furio nodded. "Water brought a thousand miles from one spring in the foothills of the Carausius Mountains, yes. Anything else you want to know, or is that it?"

There was a lot more. Later, when he repeated as much of it as he could remember to Melsuntha (in her official capacity as director of protocol)—

"What are they doing here?" she interrupted.

Basso grinned, and twitched the covers his way. "It's a threat," he said. "Which is very encouraging."

She snatched the sheet back before he could stop her. "Why?"

"It's because of Voroe," he said. "We stole their island. But, instead of sending an army, they've sent an ambassador, an elephant and a bunch of expensive toys. Diplomacy's always been the Empire's last resort. They'd far rather launch a massive pre-emptive attack, burn our fleet in the dock and burn down the City. If they haven't, it strongly suggests they can't. Not at the moment, anyway."

She nodded gravely. "You believe they intend to attack," she said.

"Goes without saying," Basso replied. "As far as they're concerned, we're rebels. Everything they've lost over the last three hundred years they fully intend to get back, just as soon as they've sorted out their internal problems. That's why..." He shrugged. "You've heard all that. The good thing about this performance is the scale of it. The full works, laying it on a foot thick. I've been reading ancient history. Full-scale Imperial embassies tended to get written up in detail, because they were so impressive and

quaint, and the model hasn't changed much in five hundred years. This is practically the full presentation. And, judging by the precedents, it's what they do when they know they won't be in a position to make war for quite some time. In which case, overawe them, put them in their place, make them realise the Empire's infinitely bigger and stronger. Actually, it's the best vote of confidence we could possibly ask for."

"I understand," she said. "What do you intend to do?"

Basso smiled. "Show them what they expect to see," he replied. "As far as they're concerned, we're semi-barbarian upstarts with a thin wash of civilisation. We need to be gauche, nouveau and deeply impressed. They'll want evidence that we've seriously underestimated them and overestimated ourselves."

"Such as?"

Basso moulded the pillow with the back of his head. "I was thinking, a guided tour of the shipyards. Not the Severus yard, of course, the government yard. They'll already have counted the number of ships in the docks, so they'll know we're serious about sea power. Ah yes, they'll be able to say when they get home, they may have a lot of ships now, but their construction facilities are rubbish. Orthodox Imperial doctrine is that thirty per cent of naval shipping gets sunk or put out of action in the first six weeks of a war."

"That's not—"

"No," Basso said. "But presumably it was true five hundred years ago, and they haven't got around to updating the textbooks. While we're at it, we'll let them see some trials at the artillery ground. We'll dig out some old Type Nines and pretend they're the cutting edge."

She frowned. "If they think we're less powerful than we are, won't that make them more likely to attack?"

Basso lifted his head off the pillow and shook it. "The reason they're taking an interest in us now is because of the war," he said. "There's a lot of other ground they've got to take back before they get round to us; under normal circumstances, we'd just have to be patient and wait our turn. But they know about the war, they've seen that we're aggressive and full of ourselves, and they need to know if we're likely to grow into a serious threat before they get to us. If so, they'll reschedule and deal with us now. I need to reassure them that we're nothing to worry about."

“I see.” She thought for a moment, then said, “Will they have observers watching the war?”

“Of course,” Basso said. “I gave a passport to one of them just the other day. They’ll be getting first-class intelligence, probably quicker than I am.”

She looked startled. “Segimerus the philosopher? He’s a...”

Basso grinned at her. “You hadn’t figured that out for yourself?”

“Why do you think he’s an Imperial agent?”

Basso pulled his share of sheet up under his chin. “He said he’s a Blemmyan. He’s not. Blemmya’s a good place to say you came from if you don’t want to be traced. But he was born in the Empire, and Segimerus isn’t his real name. He did go to Gopessus. They have excellent records there, and I’ve got friends in the faculty, remember. While he was pretending to learn Mavortine—”

“He does know Mavortine. He’s very fluent.”

“Sure,” Basso said. “I expect he learnt it before he came here. He certainly didn’t learn it while he was here, because I had him watched, and he didn’t go anywhere near a teacher or buy a Mavortine grammar.”

“He could have brought a book with him.”

“Could have,” Basso said; “didn’t. I had his luggage searched. So, if a man lies to you, what’s his reason?”

“And you let him go.”

“Of course,” Basso replied. “First, he’s a top-grade investigator, must be or the Empire wouldn’t have assigned him. So he’ll write really good, accurate, independent reports, which I shall no doubt find useful and informative. Second, he can be fed war news, and news from here, that may not be entirely true. Once you know a man’s a spy, he’s much more use to you than his employer.”

“But he’s a genius,” Melsuntha said. “Bassano thinks so.”

“Quite probably he is,” Basso replied. “No reason he can’t be a great philosopher and a spy at the same time. Oh, and he said he was in prison in Scleria.”

“He wasn’t, then.”

“Oh, he was. But not for disseminating heresy. The Empire got him released in a prisoner exchange.” He smiled. “One of *my* spies told me that. Of course, I employ professionals, not talented dilettantes.”

The ambassador stayed for a week. On the last day of his visit, he summoned the world-famous philosopher Segimerus for an audience. He was disappointed—Segimerus was laid low by a particularly vicious bout of food poisoning, and had to decline. On the day that the ambassador set sail, a messenger arrived at the philosopher's lodgings bearing a token of Imperial esteem: a pair of jewelled slippers and a jar of cucumbers preserved in honey.

The letter was sewn into the slippers, between the sole and the upper. From his extensive knowledge of the Vesani, the ambassador asked, could Segimerus confirm or contradict the following assertions and implications, made by the Vesani during the ambassador's stay: that the Vesani were descended from a tribe of nomadic horsemen; that they were a superstitious people, much influenced by astrology, augury and similar practices; that they tolerated gross inefficiency in their state-run factories; that the state had a monopoly of the manufacture of weapons and military hardware, including warships; that the First Citizen was deaf in one ear; that the attack on Voroe was the result of the Vesani's inability to control their Hus allies?

Basso had the slippers carefully repaired, and delivered to Segimerus. Then he had the City's most celebrated forger paroled from jail, showed him examples of Segimerus' handwriting, and had him write "All perfectly true" on the flyleaf of a copy of *The Mist of Reason*, which he sent by commercial courier to await the ambassador's ship's arrival at Glycis, its next scheduled call.

Fourteen

From Bassano—

... After the battle, when they promised me it was safe, I rode out to have a look. I have no idea why. Guess I felt I ought to, for some reason.

I'd never grasped before exactly how much there is to do after a battle. I guess I assumed that the victors retired wearily to their tents and drank, squabbled over the spoils or went to sleep. No chance. The battle's a piece of cake. Afterwards is when the hard physical slog begins.

First, you've got to find your wounded and get them to the surgeons, or stack them up out of the way to die; round up enemy wounded who'll survive without medical treatment, and kill the rest; identify your own dead, strip off their armour and salvageable kit, lug the bodies off for burial; if you've got carts it's not so bad, if not, it's back-breaking work, and you know you've only just started. Next, you've got to dig graves—great big pits, six or eight feet deep, so you're down through the topsoil into the clay, which means you've got to chip it out in small chunks with picks and crowbars. Then you put the bodies in. You're supposed to handle your dead comrades with reverence and respect, but by now you're worn out, it's getting late, maybe you're working by lantern-light, or it's raining, and the grave is filling up with water (or you've dug down into the water-table, so you're splashing about over your ankles in mud); so when nobody's looking you just pitch them in any old how, and you get a faceful of muddy splash each time one goes in; the whole bodies aren't so bad, but there's bound to be a load of bits you haven't been able or couldn't be bothered to match up, arms and legs, heads; you bung them in too, and then you've got all the

spoil to shovel back into the hole. At least you don't have to strip the enemy dead; the battlefield plunder contractors do that for you, and part of the deal is they dispose of the bodies. But time is money, so they don't bother digging big holes, they heap them up, sluice them down with the cheapest possible grade of lamp oil, and set them on fire. So, while you're digging and lifting and shovelling, all the air around you is full of smoke and the stink of burning meat. People I've talked to say the roasting smell gives them a real appetite; well, chances are they haven't eaten for twenty-four hours, quite likely longer than that.

Job done? Not a bit of it. Quite possibly the general's in a hurry to move on, so as soon as you're done, it's get fell in and march off. If you're lucky and you're staying put for the night, and if there's no immediate risk of the enemy sneaking back to hit you when you're not expecting it, then it's back to camp, where you build a stockade for the prisoners (digging post-holes, ramming in posts, laying and stapling wire, lining up hinges); then two hours' getting your kit cleaned up, minor repairs to armour (big repairs mean you've got to stand in line at the armourers' tent all night), scrape the mud off your boots and polish them till they shine, or go and queue up at the quartermasters' for a replacement pair (assuming they've got any: big assumption); it's much less fuss just to drag a serviceable boot off the foot of some poor dead bastard, but if they catch you doing it, you're on a charge. Kit inspection, and God help you if you're not up to scratch. Then you've got the routine everyday chores—slopping out, KP, trudging half a mile to the nearest water, staggering back with a bucket in each hand (a full bucket of water weighs thirty-five pounds); sentry duty, building or repairing camp defences; if you're transport corps or cavalry, of course, you've got your horse to see to before you can even think about yourself. By now you're far too tired to eat, but you've got to, by order, to keep your strength up, so you queue for your bowl of slop and force it down, clean out your mess kit, clean out and pack up the cooking gear. After that, in theory, the rest of the night's your own. More likely, by now it's time for your sentry detail or your turn to guard the prisoners, fetch and carry their food and blankets, gather busted spear-shafts for their campfire; or some clown's thought up something else that needs doing and can't wait till morning. If you're really lucky, you get to your tent, and maybe you're not so tired you haven't got a hope of getting to sleep; in which case, you might get three

hours before reveille, but don't bet the rent on that. Just your luck to get assigned to digging another bloody great hole, mounding up the earth and building a cairn of stones to mark the site of your famous victory.

Please don't imagine, by the way, that I joined in any of this. I just stood around, getting in the way, watching. That's what Bassano does: he stands around and watches. And please, don't be fooled into thinking he's neither use nor bloody ornament. Somewhere there's a grand overarching plan, of which Bassano standing round and watching is a fundamental and infeasible part.

That's what it's like, by the way, if Heaven has smiled on you and you've won the battle. So far, thank God, I've had no opportunity to observe what it's like to be on the losing side. I imagine there's just as much work, probably more, and infinitely more depressing.

I didn't have to eat the slop, of course. I have my own cook. I had rissoles.

Tomorrow we march on Stisileon (which is not what it's called, and I have no idea where it is). Our objective is to draw the enemy out into a pitched battle. Being realistic, we'll chase them inside their pathetic excuse for a fence, then bring up the light mangonels and lob in fireballs. The thatch will catch on fire, and then we'll see if they stay inside and burn or come out and get slaughtered. There's a betting pool. I've got two solidi on stay-inside-and-burn. Wish me luck.

Some news. Aelius has landed in the north, taken a large town, established a base of operations, and has turned the Hus loose to drive the natives into the mountains. Same as we're doing here, basically.

I feel like there's two of me. One of me finds this whole business indescribably horrible and barbaric. Because of a conscious decision by you (in which, of course, I am entirely complicit), people are dying who needn't die; people are getting cut up, losing limbs, losing fathers and husbands and sons, losing their homes and livelihoods; which is appalling, when you stop and think about it. Earthquakes and tidal waves, plague, fire; and us. What could possibly justify doing something like this on purpose?

The other me wants us to win; feels an extraordinary kind of joy when the shower of arrows pitches and the charge goes home and the artillery balls plough huge gashes in their shield wall; hates the enemy; can look at

a hundred dead Mavortines twisted on the ground and think, that's a hundred who won't give us any more grief; cheers when the general rides past; wishes he had the balls to stand in the front rank alongside the Cazars and kill a couple of dozen bad guys; can see nothing whatsoever wrong in a war that is, after all, being fought against the enemy.

I'm both those people, equally, simultaneously, indivisibly. I used to tell myself it was survival instinct; when the battle's on and the other side are dead set on killing me, naturally I'm all in favour of us, because we're all that stands between me and them. But that's not how it works. Before the fighting, after it, during it, makes no odds. I think the truth is, you can't just observe a war. It changes you. Just being here makes me a soldier. Define soldier, in this context: someone who can be both of me at the same time, and not even notice the contradictions.

What the hell. I finished Scaphio's Dialogues, and now I haven't got anything to read. If you could send me a copy of Polydectus' Paradoxes of Ethical Theory on the next supply ship, I'd be ever so grateful.

*Cordially,
Bassano*

From Segimerus, intercepted:

... has so far overcome all native resistance with almost contemptuous ease.

As to their prospects of success, I must confess that at this time I am unable to form an opinion. Much depends on how Bassianus Severus and his cabinet define victory. If their intention is simply to slaughter the Mavortines, plunder the country and withdraw, I can see no reason why they should fail. If their objective is to capture, take over and exploit Mavortis' mineral wealth, failure would require a degree of ineptitude of which they have so far shown no sign. And it is hard to imagine any other reason for invading the country. Quite simply, there is nothing here, apart from the mines and the very small amount of wealth, in the form of gold and silver jewellery amassed by the tribal aristocracies, that anybody could conceivably want.

However, if Bassianus Severus wanted trinkets, there are wealthier savages closer to home. If the Vesani wish to secure continuous supplies of

metal ores, there are uninhabited islands known to have substantial unworked deposits. In neither case would Mavortis be a logical target. Manpower? The Mavortines have always been almost pathetically eager to serve the Vesani as migrant labour. Why enslave a people who will cheerfully work for you for a pittance? Agricultural land, with a view to settlement and the establishment of colonies: Mavortis is a country of steppe, mountain and forest, hardly suited to cereal production; cattle are grazed extensively, but I believe it would be cheaper for the Vesani to buy Mavortine beef, mutton, hides and wool from free Mavortines than to take the land and try and farm it themselves. In short, there seems to be no single reason to justify this war, other than the stated objective of punishing the Mavortines for the attack on the Vesani treasury—a fatuous objective, since the attack was the work of individuals, not of the government (there is no Mavortine government), and one that could have been effortlessly achieved by burning a few villages and returning home.

If, then, there is no single reason, we must look for a concatenation of reasons, which combine to justify the effort and expenditure involved in this costly and large-scale venture. If no one objective suffices, we must conclude that Bassianus Severus wants them all—revenge, plunder, minerals, slaves and land for settlement. Discounting revenge as a pretext rather than a functioning motivation, we are left with what I can only describe as the components of empire: immediate monetary gain to offset the expenses of conquest, a long-term source of income, a strategic objective, the materials whereby that objective may be gained. In short, my belief is that Bassianus Severus intends Mavortis to be the first of a series of conquests—in short, the first step towards empire. His objectives are: manpower, to be conscripted into a very substantial professional standing army; metals and timber, for war matériel; a base of operations, for further attacks on neighbouring states; food production, to feed and supply his army; land, to be parcelled up into ranches and worked by Mavortine serf labour, to be granted as pensions to his Cazar veterans in return for military service.

As to whether Bassianus Severus is likely to succeed in such a venture (assuming my interpretation is correct), I am unconvinced and sceptical. It is easy enough to rape a woman; subsequently marrying her and living happily ever after is rather more problematic. Bassianus Severus would

not be the first to confuse successful invasion with conquest, or conquest with empire. A great deal depends on whether he has thought the matter through, and made plans accordingly.

I confess that I was much surprised by your Eminence's assessment of the Vesani; nor can I understand how my earlier dispatches could have been interpreted as corroboration for such an assessment. In my opinion, the Vesani have both the ambition and the capacity to become a serious threat to Imperial territory in the short to medium term. What I have seen here strongly reinforces my view. I would therefore recommend...

(Basso drafted a letter of his own and had it copied out by the champion forger. Much of it was the same, apart from the last few paragraphs, but the recommendations were rather different.)

From Aelius, official dispatches:

... Intend therefore to establish a chain of strongly defended forts, with adequate garrisons, to cut off each of the major tribes from its traditional allies. Objective: to prevent any possibility of Mavortine tribes uniting and mounting serious resistance. Main risk at present lies in formation of tribal confederacy hiding out in enormous forests in centre of country; such a force would be able to split country in two, isolating our expeditionary forces, and would thereafter be able to raid and harass our forces at will, retreating immediately into inaccessible territory, where pursuit too dangerous to contemplate. Only after forts built, tribes isolated and any ongoing insurgent activity crushed, long-term aim to clear broad channel through forest and build military roads to link northern and southern regions. Once this has been achieved, planned development of Mavortis should be feasible, all things being equal.

To achieve immediate aim of creating chain of forts, I will require reinforcements, principally to act as garrisons. At present, estimated requirement 6,000 to 8,000 heavy infantry (preferably Cazars) plus 1,000 to 1,500 cavalry (not Hus—unsuitable for stationary duty); also increased supplies &c. Would be grateful to receive instructions as soon as possible, since decision will inevitably affect immediate future conduct of operations. Appreciate that additional troops and supplies will constitute heavy burden

on the Republic's resources; would venture to suggest, however, that in the long term, would prove the cheapest and most efficient way of attaining the ultimate objective, which may not be possible to achieve by any other currently available alternative strategy.

“He’s already got twelve thousand,” Cinio protested, “and he’s hardly lost a man, or so he’s told us. What the hell does he want another six thousand for?”

“Six to eight thousand,” Basso said gently.

“Have you any idea of the unit cost of sending a soldier to Mavortis?” The first time, as far as Basso could remember, that Cinio had lost his temper in his presence. “Including recruitment, outfitting, training, transport? Fifty-one nomismata. Do you know how much it costs to keep a soldier over there for a day? One nomisma four. Nearly sixteen thousand a day, and he wants to up that by another ten thousand. And please don’t say we can bring that down a little, because I’ve cut costs to the bone as it is.”

Basso waited for a moment or so, then said: “Actually, it’s more like nine and a half thousand. He wants cavalry as well, remember.”

“Cavalry.” Cinio made it sound like the most depraved of luxuries. “Let me just remind you what a military horse eats in a day. Oats, eight pounds six ounces. Hay—”

“Cinio.” Basso raised his voice just a little, and Cinio subsided, like a pan of boiling water taken off the fire. “War is very expensive. It’s how kings bankrupt whole countries. Under normal circumstances, I’d leave it well alone. But we’ve been into all that, and the plain fact is, losing a war’s a damn sight more expensive than winning one. If we win, we get it all back, with interest. If we lose, it’s all gone for ever. This is one of those times where we’ve just got to find the money and try and look cheerful.” He leaned back in his chair. “The money’s there, after all.”

Cinio looked at him. “Will the Bank cover it?”

“We’ll underwrite an issue of war bonds,” Basso replied, “which is much the same thing. Look at it rationally. If we do it the way Aelius says, we’ll break the back of the resistance and it’ll all be over in a few months. If we try and do it on the cheap, we could be tangled up out there for years,

and then it really will start to cost money.” He grinned. “You’re a hell of a finance minister, Cinio, but you wouldn’t last five minutes in business.”

“The Republic isn’t a business,” Cinio said rebelliously. “If it all goes wrong, we can’t just wind it up, sell off the buildings and start again with someone else’s money. We could be responsible for fifty years of grinding poverty, not to mention the risk of being invaded by the Empire when we’re too weak to defend ourselves. And if the state goes under, the Bank will go with it. Have you considered that?”

Going a bit too far. “That’s like asking me if I remembered to breathe this morning,” Basso said. “The Bank’s not going anywhere, and neither is the Republic. In six months’ time, when we’re mining iron and copper, I’ll expect an apology.”

After Cinio had gone, Basso sent for Tragazes.

“We are, in fact, at the extreme limit of our cash reserve,” Tragazes told him blandly, as though he’d just asked him the time. “When you sent for me, I was preparing a draft of a statement to the banking commission, which we will need to file at some point in the next five days, unless the situation changes radically. Under the circumstances it’s just a formality, but —”

“Don’t do that,” Basso said. “Massage the books a little. We both know the Bank’s all right really, and a statement might be misunderstood, the way the markets are going.”

Tragazes blinked at him. “I would have to record a formal protest.”

“Noted.” Basso looked at him, but that sort of thing never seemed to work on Tragazes. A man entirely without fear, and at the same time a born worrier. “But as far as the commission’s concerned, we’re still within our reserve. All right?”

“As you wish.” Tragazes made a note, as though it was something that was likely to slip his mind. “I can bring forward the payments from the Caecilii by ten days. The money is already on deposit with the United Central, awaiting clearance. Provided their letters of credit are honoured in Scleria, I can foresee no problem there.”

Basso frowned. “What’s Scleria got to do with it?”

“Vipsanius Caecilius financed his investment in the military supplies cartel by selling various debts to the Advancing Victory in Scleria. To pay

us, he needs to draw down on the proceeds of the sale. He's written letters of credit, but has not yet received confirmation of clearance."

"What sort of debts?"

"The benefit of agricultural and industrial development loans," Tragazes said. "Quite sound, as far as we can gather."

"The Caecilii bought into the cartel by trading loans to small farmers?"

"And some manufacturers, here in the City. War work, mostly, so quite reliable. And the same with the farmers. Given war demand, the price of grain is high, as you know."

Later, Melsuntha asked Basso what the matter was. She had to ask several times.

"That idiot Caecilius," Basso told her. "He owes us a lot of money, which he's due to pay back. In order to pay us, he's relying on a bunch of loans he's palmed off on the Victory in Scleria."

"Oh," she said.

"Quite," Basso replied. "The loans are farm and small business, which means they're dependent on us—the Treasury—paying the farmers and tent-peg-makers and sword-fittings-wholesalers on time. Which isn't going to happen."

She nodded slowly. "I thought you said..."

"I did. And I was right." Basso scowled, and massaged the bridge of his nose with thumb and forefinger. "The Bank lends to the Treasury, the Treasury buys war supplies, the farmers and tradesmen pay off their loans, the money goes round in a loop, and nobody ever gets to find out it isn't actually there. It's just that the timing's off by a little bit."

"If Caecilius is a little bit late in paying, does it actually matter?"

Basso sighed. "It shouldn't," he said. "So long as he actually does pay—which he will, because the Treasury will pay the farmers and tradesmen, eventually. What makes it a bit awkward is that Tragazes needs money now, to make good our deposits. Otherwise, he's got to report to the commission that our reserves no longer cover our exposure, and once that gets around, the markets will panic and the stock will start to slide. All quite ridiculous, of course, but that's how it works. You can make a fortune out of it if you're on the right side, but it's no fun if you're on the wrong end, like we are at the moment."

"What can you do?"

“Nothing I want to,” Basso replied. “What I can’t do is put pressure on the Treasury for any of the money we’ve lent them, because I’m the bloody government. So, if we need to raise money in a hurry, we’d have to go after our private customers—basically, everybody else. And if we start squeezing, that’ll cause an even worse panic, and we’ll wipe millions of nomismata off the value of perfectly good assets.”

“All right,” Melsuntha said. “Lie to the commission.”

Basso laughed. “That’s what we’re doing right now,” he said. “And if Antigonus was still around, we’d be fine. But Tragazes doesn’t seem to get it. I practically had to sit on his head to get him to tell a little white lie. Proper grown-up lying—”

“Get rid of him. Appoint someone else.”

Basso smiled at her. “Do you fancy being chief clerk?”

She looked thoughtful. “Probably not,” she said. “I could handle the broad sweep of policy, but not the details. I don’t have the experience.”

“That’s the trouble,” Basso said. “Right now, the only two men in the City who know how the Bank actually works are Tragazes and me; and I just don’t have the time. I’m stuck with him.”

She thought some more. “What about the twins? Haven’t they been learning the business?”

Not something that had occurred to him, and he paused for a moment to give it serious consideration. “They’re not up to it,” he said, “even with Tragazes advising them. They’re just kids.”

“You were their age when you took over.”

“They’re not me.” The force behind the statement took him by surprise. “I really miss Antigonus,” he said. “In my life, there’ve been two men I’ve been able to rely on, him and Aelius; I mean really rely, so I can turn my back on something and know it’ll be done right, as well as I could do it or better. My fault,” he added with a grin. “When I dreamed up this scheme, I was sort of assuming Antigonus would still be around. Probably I should have pulled the plug when he died. Just bad luck, really.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in good and bad luck.”

That night he sat up late, even later than usual. He’d sent for the figures on the Caecilius loan. They sat on the table in front of him like a dinner going

cold; the longer he left them, the more unpalatable they'd be.

Most of all, he thought, right now I'd like to talk to my sister again, just for a few minutes; about the weather, or something that happened when we were children, Mannerist architecture or the Dulichean heresy or trends in contemporary choral music, anything at all. It did seem faintly ridiculous that the First Citizen of the Vesani Republic, richest man in the City, controller of great armies and decider of the fate of thousands, wasn't allowed to talk to his own sister about the weather. But no; she might as well be dead, except that it was worse than that.

(Come on, Basso, you're a clever man, a remarkably fine orator, a politician. You could find the words, make the promises, arrive at a rapprochement, some kind of deal. He took a sheet of paper and reached for a pen.)

A substantial part of his life, a major component in the mechanism that drove him, was inaccessible, as though a wall had been built right across the City, just to stop him going home. He thought about that. Finally, it occurred to him to wonder who would build such a wall. The answer came as no surprise.

Because I love my sister more than anybody else, he realised, I had to build the wall. A man who faces opposition must either fight or accept. I refuse to fight my own sister, to defeat her by any means necessary. Because I love her, I can't refuse her anything, and what she wants is to hate me. Fight or accept. Accept.

(And it occurred to him that in his life he'd done many things that other people considered admirable, brilliant, wonderful; all of which he placed little value on, just as a conjuror knows he hasn't really performed magic, no matter what the audience may think. There was just one admirable thing he'd done—one *honest* thing—and the only other person who'd ever know about it hated him enough to want to see him dead. And therein, it pleased him to think, lies the true magnificence of Basso the Magnificent; his one honest thing, his only failure, the one thing he wanted and told himself he couldn't have. Basso the Wall-Builder.)

Instead of writing the letter, he dealt with the Caecilius loan. Eventually he managed to tack something together that'd mess up the audit commission just long enough to buy him the time he needed, all things being equal, which they seldom were.

Meeting of the House Treasury sub-committee:

“In the light of General Aelius’ recommendations,” Basso heard himself say (but he felt far away, as though he was watching himself from the gallery), “I believe we need a fresh look at the currency situation.”

Percennius Macer (old-style Optimate, furious with him for agreeing to the war, back in favour after a long time in the cold) raised a hand to interrupt. “Your inspired currency reforms have worked exceptionally well,” he said. “Surely the last thing we want to do is mess about with them.”

“I’m not proposing any change to the *nomisma*,” Basso said. “What I have in mind is a short-term measure designed to help with procurement of military supplies and war matériel.”

Percennius raised an eyebrow (he practises, Basso reckoned, in front of a mirror). “Is there a problem? We haven’t heard anything about it before.”

“Not yet,” Basso said. “And I’d like to keep it that way. But yes, I do see a problem coming.” He turned his head and made eye contact with Lollius Vipsanius, Caecilius’ uncle. “At the moment, whenever we buy something or order something, payment is—nominally at least—in gold coin. Now, because we’ve got better things to do than drive cartloads of heavy, stealable money across two continents, when we buy something in Scleria, say, we don’t send them actual cash. We write a letter to someone in Scleria who holds money for us, or who owes us money, or who’s contracted to pay us money for something they’ve had from us, and we ask the Sclerian to pay what we owe on our behalf. That, in a nutshell, is the letter-of-credit system, and in peacetime, for everyday commercial transactions between businessmen, it works just fine. Right now, though, in places like Scleria and Auxentia we’re paying out a lot more than we’re getting paid, so it’s getting hard to arrange letters of credit. Result: important war-supplies deals are getting jammed up, suppliers whose good will we need aren’t getting paid on time; it’s bad for the army, and it’s bad for our good name as a commercial nation. Fairly soon, we’ll find that if we want to raise letters of credit, we’ll have to do it through foreign banks, who’ll charge us for the privilege, or else treat the transactions as loans and screw us for interest. Hands up anybody who wants to see that happen.”

He used the rhetorical pause to examine key faces. They didn’t appear to know what was likely to come next. He sucked in some air and went on:

“How’d it be if, instead of letters of credit, we used something else, some other kind of currency; not physical gold, or a promise of gold, or a complex system of balancing debts in gold, but something quite other; as good as gold, but not quite so heavy or so bulky? Good idea?”

Clodius Faber: on his side when it suited him. “What do you have in mind?”

Basso grinned. “Paper,” he said. “Actually, it’s not a new idea. We considered it just after the Treasury robbery, when we didn’t have any gold. I believe the technical term is assignats. Paper notes,” he went on, as the faces frowned or looked blank, “bearing a promise to pay, in gold money, on demand; backed by solid assets, such as government land. A man on a fast horse can carry a sackful of them and still be in Tavia or Gonessus in sixty hours. Also,” he pressed on, before anyone had a chance to speak, “there’s the small matter of money supply. The fact is, we have more wealth than gold. There isn’t enough shiny yellow metal in the City, quite possibly in the West, to represent the value of our assets. Right now, we need to draw on the value of our assets to pay for stuff we’re actually using, like wheat and wool and timber; but we’re hampered by the fact that we don’t have enough metal tokens. To get more tokens, we have to buy and import gold, melt it down, hammer it into thin sheets, stamp out a load of small flat discs and bash them between two dies. It takes time, it costs money. We can’t afford to waste either. So, instead, we write paper notes. Assignats. People who get paid with them know they’re good; it says on them, the Vesani Republic promises to pay, and in the wildly unlikely event that it doesn’t, this piece of paper you’re holding is as good as a mortgage on the most valuable real estate in the civilised world. What’s in it for us? We can spend money that we’ve got, that we can afford to spend, but which is currently locked up and useless because we haven’t got quite enough shiny yellow discs. Think about it. Liquidity problems solved at a stroke. No need to mess with letters of credit, no more relying on foreign intermediaries, so we pay our bills on the nail. If you’re worried about hundreds of foreigners turning up on the Treasury steps waving bits of paper and clamouring for gold coin, don’t be. Our assignats will be as good as money; in no time flat, they’ll be money, a whole new circulating medium—better than gold coin, for the reasons stated, almost certainly changing hands at a premium; a handy windfall for us, just like what happened when we purified the

nomisma. Honestly, gentlemen, if there's a drawback I can't see it. Well? Anybody?"

It was just as well he'd thought it through beforehand. But he had, and none of the objections fired at him found him unprepared. Forgery: there was a new kind of paper, the Bank's trading arm had bought the formula and technique for making it direct from the inventor, so the Republic would have a total world monopoly, and forgery would be impossible. What about the debts the Treasury had already incurred; in particular, the huge debts it owed to the Charity & Social Justice? Would the Bank allow the Treasury to buy back those loans, using the new paper? Of course it would, Basso replied, no problem at all. He'd even waive the early-repayment penalties written in to the loan agreements—

"Which means," Basso said (he was exhausted, more tired than he could ever remember being), "that once the Treasury's repaid a couple of the smaller loans, we'll have plenty of cash in hand to cover our deposit requirements, and the problem just melts away."

"I see," Melsuntha said, massaging between his shoulder blades. As always, he found the strength in her fingers disconcerting. "Or at least, I think I see. Won't you lose money?"

Basso shook his head. "We'll only repay a few of the loans," he said, "I'll see to that. It's more a gesture of good faith than anything. And we raise enough to secure our deposit, which means Tragazes won't have to lie to the banking commission."

"How on earth did you manage to get it through?"

Basso laughed. "I needed two enemy votes," he replied. "Lollius Vipsanius was easy; I sent him a note telling him that if he voted in favour, I'd let his nephew off the hook over the payment he's due to make us—you know, the one that caused all this mess in the first place."

"That's one. Who was the other?"

"Laelius Priscus," Basso replied. "Two years ago, he poisoned his wife's lover. Small piece of insurance I've been keeping for a rainy day. I pinned a copy of the poisoner's confession to his copy of the order sheet. He went ever such a funny colour when he saw it."

From Bassano;

... Victory. Sort of.

I'm writing this in the back of a cart, under a tree, somewhere in the foothills of the Big Pointy Mountains (marked brown on your map; they fill the middle of Mavortis). We've just been round picking up bales of captured enemy shields. Of course, we don't use them as shields. They're just sheets of limewood, the fancy ones with a copper rim. We smash them up and use them for kindling. I say we. The soldiers smash them up. I watch.

Anyway, these shields need collecting because we just fought a pitched battle, against the last major tribe this side of the Big Pointies. We demolished them, of course; same old drill. They broke and ran before we even reached them, and the rest was just butcher's work. God help me, I was deeply annoyed I wasn't allowed to join in. They're running away, I said, there's no danger, they aren't even trying to fight back; but no, not allowed. I was livid. I might not get another chance, I told them; all the hassle we've had drawing these people into a pitched battle, I don't want to go home and admit I'm the only soldier in the Vesani army who never got to kill even one Mavortine. But you're not a soldier, they pointed out.

There wasn't time to explain. So I sulked instead.

Statistics. By my estimate, there were about seven thousand of them, to start with. Five hundred or so pulled out before the lines were drawn up. They must've taken one look at us and refused to come out to play; just turned round and walked off the battlefield. Killed: two thousand, give or take. We tend to work on the number of shields we recover (another reason for gathering them); of course, more men drop shields than die, but at least a fifth of the poor bastards don't have shields to start with, so it sort of balances out. So, say two thousand dead. We caught and spared another seven hundred. That leaves three and a half thousand still at large. Mind, I'm not saying I'd have killed them all. Just some.

Those three and a half thousand will not, however, escape to the safety of the Big Pointies. We fought with the mountains at our backs. The ones that got away now have nowhere to go except back into territory we've already thoroughly subdued. No villages to feed and harbour them; they'll wander around till they're starving hungry, then they'll turn themselves in and take advantage of our justifiably celebrated clemency. A clean surrender buys a place in a work gang: food, shelter, new shoes, and so much work they're too tired to think about patriotism and the freedom of

Mavortis. Six months on the gang and they earn their discharge; they can go home (if it's still standing) to their wives and their thin, cold children and the empty space where their herds and flocks used to be. Then they're back, begging for work so they can feed those hungry, whining mouths. Every chance the forts will be completed way ahead of schedule. We have eager, motivated men working on building them.

All through, Aelius' strategy has been to keep the hostiles from getting into the mountains and the forest. That's all he's been concerned about. So, we've blasted a way through, got here as quickly as we can, and sealed off the loathsome, inaccessible middle of the country. Job done. From now on, it's a matter of building forts. We've had the devil's own job provoking the hostiles into the field; for good reason, they always lose, we always slaughter them. The most we expect out of them from now on is feeble little attacks on the forts, which will fail. At this rate, won't be long before there's one fort for every twenty square miles. Basically, the forts are nails, to pin them to the ground so they can't move.

We're using the new recruits you sent us to garrison the forts. It means most of them haven't yet seen a Mavortine armed with anything more lethal than a shovel or a bucket. If all goes to plan, they never will.

Sure, some of them are going to slip through and make it into the forest. Fine. Let them stay there and eat squirrels. When they get sick of that, they can come out and get a job working for us, in the mines or on the new farms, just like everyone else. Pretty soon, the Mavortines will wonder how the hell they ever managed to survive by the old ways, before we came along to look after them. It'll be as though they'd come to the City and got rubbish-wage jobs on building sites or in sweatshops, which has been the dream of every Mavortine male for generations; only they won't have to leave their motherland or their families to do it. Perfect solution; everybody happy. So nice when things turn out that way.

I used to worry about what being here was doing to me. I don't worry any more. I guess that's what's worrying me. I guess, if the value you put on human beings sinks low enough, you stand a fair chance of establishing universal peace and prosperity. Bring those values down, and everybody can afford to be happy. It's only when you start packing out the shopping basket with luxury goods such as freedom and dignity and the right to self-determination that you price poor folks out of the market.

It makes sense, once you've seen it for yourself. If you've never seen it, of course, it must sound barbaric.

I had a chance to discuss this very issue with Segimerus; Aelius has finished with him, so he's back with us for a while. He agrees with me. He says our traditional views are parochial and limited, the result of cultural influences. But the time he spent in the Empire convinced him that truth depends on where you are. Truths universally acknowledged in the City are meaningless in a place like this, and vice versa. Truth is a product of geography and history; you have to reset your conscience, like resetting your watch when you get off the boat in a foreign port.

Question is: will Mavortine truths still be true once I get home? I'm worried about that.

*Cordially,
Bassano*

"I hope I'm wrong," Basso said, "but you look depressingly like a deputation. Come in, close the door and for crying out loud stop looking so damn solemn."

If they'd been the enemy, he could have handled them easily—blend good humour and sudden grim determination, informality, bluster, gentle threats and sweet reason; disconcert, worry, confuse. Few better at it in the history of the Republic. But they were supposed to be on his side.

"Let me get this straight," he said, when they'd made their nervous case. "You're proposing that we abandon a war in which we've yet to lose a single battle, in which we've pacified three-quarters of the country, in which we've done all the hard work and are poised to start mining operations that are guaranteed to pay back the large sum of money we've already spent, and which, if you have your way, we'll have to write off. Well?"

"It'll be six months at least before the first ore is ready to be shipped," Cinio said wretchedly. "At this rate, by then we'll have spent—"

"I know how much, thanks," Basso cut him off. "And I'd like to remind you that a not inconsiderable slice of that is my money, so you can believe me when I say I'm only too keenly aware of the costs incurred." He frowned. It would be so easy to turn this into a hostile debate, which he

would of course win; but that would be missing the point. “In six months, we dig the first ore. In a year, we’re in profit. Don’t know if you’ve been following the markets, but the price of iron and copper is sky-high.”

“We noticed,” said the trade secretary. “They’re high because we’re buying it all, for the war.”

“Exactly.” Basso smiled. “And we can take advantage of that price by selling futures. Sell it now, dig it out later, and we’re guaranteed to sell at the top of the market. Even if we don’t do that,” he went on, softening his voice, letting his face relax, “we’re going to do very well out of Mavortis in the not-too-distant future. Labour costs practically nil; infrastructure for haulage and shipping already in place and paid for; we’ve done all the work and paid out all the money. Giving up now would be crazy.”

Sentio, who’d been doing a very good job of hiding behind other people, sat up straight. “The project is thirty per cent over budget,” he said. “All our middle- and long-range forecasts are just waste paper. We’ve got to draw a line somewhere, we can’t just go on spending.”

Basso grinned. “Why not?”

Awkward silence. “We haven’t got the money.”

“We’ve got paper,” Basso said. “And ink, and wood to make woodblocks. What’ve we written so far, since we brought in the paper money? Nine million? On the book value of public assets, we could write ten times that.”

“It’s making people nervous,” Furio said. “They can’t see an end to it.”

“I can’t help it if people are stupid,” Basso said. “What we’re actually doing is really pretty amazing. We’re creating a whole lot of pretend money, putting it into circulation, running a massive war economy on it; paying workers to make things to sell to the army, paying traders to procure food and materials. And you know what? At the end of the process, magically, a good slice of that pretend money’s turned into real money, which we’d never have brought into being if we’d played safe and stuck to the rules.” He leaned forward a little; Sentio tried to wriggle through the back of his chair. “When I revalued the nomisma you didn’t complain, but that was basically the same thing—pretend money giving birth to real money, and a hell of a lot of it. You’re just wetting yourself because paper money’s still a strange new idea; you want something that chinks when you rattle it, or you get scared. Fine; that’s like a small kid needing a night light in the dark. I

suggest you pull yourself together and look at the figures. Look at the increase in tax revenues, thanks to the war boom. That's real money we're taking in. Even if there weren't any mines, even if we weren't six months away from the next-best thing to a world monopoly in metals, what we've done would still be all right—the pretend money would breed enough actual gold coins to manage the Treasury debt, and still leave more than enough over for running the country. But it's all right. We've got the mines. Honestly and truthfully, there's nothing at all to worry about. We can't fail, because we've already won.”

From Aelius:

... estimated at between sixteen and twenty thousand, have joined the forces already known to have taken refuge in the forest, bringing the total to something in the region of thirty thousand men.

I have to report that this development concerns me greatly. It is precisely what our strategy was designed to avoid. Unfortunately, we were entirely unaware of the existence of another pass through the mountains. It is not shown on the map, and our scouts happened not to go there. The southern army has now occupied the area and started constructing a fort, so no further leakage into the forest is anticipated. Nor has there been any insurgent activity. Nevertheless, this has upset all our plans, and I can no longer guarantee that the development phase will begin on time, or that it will proceed without interruption to a successful outcome.

Naturally, I take full responsibility.

On the positive side, it is highly doubtful that such a large force will be able to sustain itself in the forest for any length of time; apart from game, nuts and berries there are no food sources, and there are no indications that the tribesmen were able to take any substantial stock of provisions with them. They have, in effect, placed themselves under siege. The fort network was designed with this very situation in mind. Even if they do succeed in breaking through the fort line with a view to foraging for supplies, there are no supplies for them to find. We have impounded all food reserves and secured them inside the forts; this has had the effect of making the village populations entirely dependent on us, and it is therefore highly unlikely that they would jeopardise their access to food by giving the forces in the forest

any aid or comfort. Internal clan and tribal feuds and animosities likewise militate against any cooperation between the men in the forest and their countrymen outside it. Consequently, they must either starve, surrender or come out and engage us in the field. The last of these three would be preferable, since we would almost certainly win an overwhelming victory, thereby bringing the problem to a quick and certain conclusion.

Nevertheless, in order to adapt our previous strategy to meet these new circumstances and to guarantee success (in so far as that is possible in war), I strongly recommend that we build additional forts, which will in turn require additional troops to garrison them. With the fort line as presently constituted, there is a remote but troublesome possibility that a highly mobile, motivated and numerous insurgent force might be able to attack and overwhelm one of our forts before assistance could arrive from neighbouring posts. Such a victory would have little tactical or strategic value, but might well have an unwelcome morale effect far in excess of its actual military significance. Thus far, we have shown ourselves to be invincible. One reverse, however trivial, might inspire the enemy to prolong resistance. As I see it, time is our greatest enemy. The longer it takes us to establish total security, the longer it will be before the development programme can begin; the longer the Vesani Treasury will have to continue paying out, without receiving any returns. It is conceivable that the enemy, although politically and economically unsophisticated, may be aware of this weakness, and may be planning to exploit it as best they can. Additional forts, and additional men, would enable me to take all possible measures to prevent a token enemy victory, and thereby ensure a quick and final resolution to the war.

The closest thing to a Cazar ambassador was the resident of the Salt Brotherhood. The Vesani had bought their salt from the Cazars since Imperial times, and the Brotherhood was one of the oldest trading companies in the City. By the terms of its ancient constitution, a third of its executive officers were Cazars, from one particular clan; the most senior Cazar director lived in the City, and spoke for his people on the very few occasions when this was considered necessary.

“Another six thousand,” he said, stroking his moustache. “That may not be possible.”

He spoke excellent Vesani; the Cazars learnt the language quickly and easily, and when they went home and spoke Cazar again, their neighbours had trouble understanding them. He was almost as tall as Aelius, a few years younger, bald (either naturally or because he shaved his head; you could never tell without looking so closely as to give offence) and several stone overweight. He had enormous hands, which he never seemed to know what to do with.

“It shouldn’t be a problem,” Basso said briskly. “Salt and healthy young men are your country’s only exports. You’ve never had a shortage of either.”

The salt brother smiled. “With respect,” he said, “there’s never been such a level of demand; for both,” he added, “but particularly the latter. And the difference between salt and men is that increasing production takes longer.”

Basso nodded. “When a commodity’s in short supply,” he said, “the price goes up. I understand that. So I’m raising the recruitment bounty to one nomisma.”

The salt brother frowned at his hands; they appeared to be more than usually irksome. “That will help, for sure,” he said. “But six thousand; I can promise you four. The other two may not be forthcoming.”

Not forthcoming. Wonderful phrase. “Why not?”

“Partly, it’s the time of year,” the salt brother said. “There’s a lot going on. The sheep have to be rounded up and moved to the lower pastures, and shorn. It’s also the time for building salmon-weirs and hunting buffalo, deer and seals.”

Basso looked at him. “That’s important?”

“Vital.” The salt brother looked surprised. “The buffalo herds migrate into the high valleys at this time of year. We drive them into ambushes and slaughter them; we rely on their meat to see us through the winter. If there aren’t enough men to drive the herd...” He shrugged. “Perhaps you might try recruiting among the Cazars who are already here, in the city,” he said. “There must be several thousand.”

Basso chose to ignore that suggestion. “You can get me four thousand.”

“I believe so, yes. Provided you offer the increased bounty.” The salt brother frowned, then went on, “Forgive my asking, but why do you need more men? Is the war going badly? Have casualties been very high?”

“Practically nil,” Basso replied. “And the war’s going very well. But it turns out we need more men than we originally thought.”

“Ah.” The salt brother nodded. “I’m delighted to hear it. My people enjoy victory, but are easily disheartened by defeat. It’s why we don’t have wars, only battles. One battle lost and we give up and go home. Of course,” he added, “my people in Mavortis don’t have that option. They can’t leave, unless they swim.”

Basso smiled. “If they enjoy victory, they’ll be having the time of their lives,” he said.

Next, he sent for the High Commissioner of the Hus. He’d been startled to discover that such a person existed; it was, he said, a bit like having accredited diplomatic relations with fire or the plague. But there was a High Commissioner; and he looked so much like a Vesani would imagine a Hus to appear that to begin with, Basso was convinced he must be an impostor; an out-of-work actor in a false beard and stage costume.

“My people have a rich and ancient culture,” the Hus told him, in flawless Vesani, with a comic-opera accent that in no way impeded his mastery of syntax. “It’s just different from your own. We are nomads. We move across the earth like the tide moves up the beach; but the tide obeys the moon, and we obey our own laws and traditions. We have ambassadors in every major capital city, and a substantial body of treaties and agreements. I’m surprised you don’t know this.”

“Forgive me,” Basso said, without the slightest trace of an apology in his voice. “I need soldiers. Two thousand, infantry, for garrison duty.”

The Hus frowned. “My people are horsemen,” he said. “We are practically born in the saddle. We say, why should any sane man walk when he can ride? And we do not do well when confined inside buildings. If we spend more than half an hour in a building, we tend to burn it down.”

“Fine,” Basso said. “So you can’t help me.”

The Hus looked at him. “Replace some of the Cazars in your field army with our horsemen,” he said, “and send the Cazars to man your castles. We are the finest assault troops in the world. Where we have been, the grass does not grow again for a hundred years.”

“Yes,” Basso said, “that’s rather the point. Please don’t take this the wrong way, but we were hoping to take over Mavortis and develop it after the war’s over.”

The Hus grinned. “In that case,” he said, “I don’t think I can help you. Why not try the Jazyges? They are simple people, not intelligent, but they can be trained to perform simple tasks. Or the Blemmyans. The Auxentines hire Blemmyans for siege operations and domestic law enforcement.”

There was no Jazygite representative of any kind, but the Moral & Ethical Bank (the Caelius brothers, in partnership with the Trustees of the Studium) acted as gangmasters for recruiting Blemmyan labour for civil engineering projects. Saloninus Caelius was sure he’d be able to deliver two thousand Blemmyans within a fortnight.

“Soldiers?” Basso asked.

Caelius made a vague gesture of demurrals. “It might be a good idea not to tell them exactly what they’re being hired for,” he said, “at least, not till they’re actually on the boat, at sea. By that point, I don’t suppose they’ll make any difficulties. They’re a very biddable people.”

Basso spent several hours holed up in his study with the army lists and personnel returns. By replacing all the Cazar non-combatants—drivers, porters, artisans, cooks, low-grade clerks—with Blemmyans, he could free fourteen hundred Cazars for the field army. That still left six hundred to find.

The next day, a rather surprising announcement was posted up all over the City, and read out by official heralds for the benefit of the non-literate. Volunteers were needed for the army in Mavortis. Any resident alien who joined up would be guaranteed full citizenship on his return, together with a one-nomisma bounty and full military pay.

In a way, Basso said later, it couldn’t have come at a better time. The Opposition were still exhausted after the gruelling battle over the Finance Bill to pay for the reinforcements; they simply didn’t have the energy to make more than a token protest at the further extension of the franchise. Basso’s assurance that it was a unique measure designed to deal with a specific situation that was highly unlikely to recur and therefore set no precedent was more or less accepted by default, and the Enfranchisement Bill passed comfortably. The Opposition were, of course, the least of his problems.

“Sentio reckons I’ve lost my sense of proportion,” Basso said wearily, stretching his legs out to the end of the bath. “Furio reckons it’s pointless, because nobody in their right mind would leave a safe job in the City to go fight a war, just to be a citizen. At least Cinio isn’t speaking to me, so I’m spared his input.” He sighed. “I’m not used to this,” he said. “My father had it all the time when he was First Citizen, but that’s because he wasn’t very bright and didn’t know how to handle his allies. My mother used to say the fact that he was his own worst enemy was a tribute to his single-mindedness, since there were so many of his friends competing for the honour.”

“I think I’d have liked your mother,” Melsuntha said.

“I doubt it. She’d have hated you. She was a snob and she thought foreigners weren’t proper humans.”

“She was Vesani.” Melsuntha shrugged; wasted gesture, since Basso had his back to her. “I like a lot of people who don’t like me. If I didn’t, I’d hate everybody in the City.”

“My mother was a clever woman in lots of ways,” Basso said, “but she had a fundamental core of stupidity that cancelled them all out. I worry sometimes that I take after her. Still,” he went on, “about the only person in the world she really got on well with was her maid, and she was Blemmyan.”

“Perhaps she was one of those women who can only really talk to servants,” Melsuntha suggested. “There seem to be a lot of them here.”

“Maybe,” Basso said. “She certainly didn’t talk to my father. At him, yes, all the time. He was very good at not listening. There were times when I wondered if my deafness was hereditary, rather than because of getting bashed on the head.”

“You listen,” Melsuntha said, “but more the way a spy listens, to gather useful information that you can hold against the speaker. You eavesdrop on your own conversations.”

Basso laughed at that. “I’m more interested in what the things people say about them, I’ll grant you,” he said. “Which makes me think I’m like my mother. She did that. Like I said, fundamentally not very bright.” He reached for a towel. “Bassano listens because he’s interested,” he said. “He’s interested in everything. I’ve never been able to understand that.”

“You admire him for it.”

“Definitely,” Basso replied. “It fascinates me, like watching someone play the flute. Don’t want to be able to do it myself, but I admire the man who can.”

She laughed. He looked at her. “Sorry,” she said. “You playing the flute. It doesn’t really bear thinking about.”

He frowned, mock-irritable. “I could play the flute if I wanted to.”

“I don’t think so,” she said. “It takes time and practice. Unless you can do something perfectly first go...”

“That’s a gross slander,” Basso said. “I can be really patient if I have to. When I was a kid...”

He stopped, his face suddenly dead. It was only for a moment, but she saw and was keenly interested. Then he went on, “When I was a kid, my sister got given one of those wooden puzzles; you know, where you’ve got to slide one part across and turn it up and round until suddenly it magically fits. She played with it for an hour and then gave up. It took me a week, but I did it.”

She nodded. “Because she’d given up?”

“What made you ask that?”

Shrug. “I don’t suppose it was the sheer joy of applied geometry,” she said. “Cussedness, maybe. But I’d have thought you’d have solved it straight away.”

“Well, I didn’t. But I stuck at it.”

“Why?”

His turn to shrug. “I can’t remember.”

From Bassano:

... We got there as soon as we could, but by then it was all over. The embers were still hot, though. I trod on a piece of burned rafter, and it scorched my foot through the sole of my boot.

We don’t yet know if any of our people made it out alive. Hard to see how they could’ve. The likeliest sequence of events is, they crept up round the fort on all sides during the night, and at first light they attacked on three sides at once. We found no dead bodies on the south wall, and dead men, ours and theirs, on the other three. Seems as though the only equipment they used was scaling ladders; we found four, busted up on the ground,

presumably pushed down by our people. They didn't stop to loot the corpses or collect their own dead; just set fire to the place and left. Casualty ratio something in the order of six of theirs to one of ours, which Aelius says is astonishing. Usually, when an assault takes that sort of punishment, they give up pretty quickly. None of their dead had any sort of armour, just shields, and a lot didn't even have them. Most of their dead were shot. It would seem that once they got up onto the rampart, they had it mostly their own way; our people didn't put up much of a fight, hand-to-hand. Aelius says he's not surprised. They were second-line troops, after all. They'd been taught basic archery, but not hand-to-hand stuff. So far we've found a hundred and sixteen of ours, out of a garrison of a hundred and forty (only we're not quite sure of that—inconsistencies in personnel assignment lists and duty rosters). Twenty Blemmyans, the rest Cazars, plus one Vesani (pay corps liaison) of course, some bodies have been so badly burned we can't tell which side they were, and some would've burnt away completely.

So: from what we can gather they came from the forest, got past all our scouts and observation posts, stormed the fort with no gear except ladders, kept at it in spite of appalling losses, torched the place and withdrew. Conclusion: they knew what they were doing, they did it well and they were absolutely determined to do it, even if they got killed. I would suggest that this makes them a nuisance, possibly even a genuine threat, and the war isn't over after all.

Advance warning. Aelius is going to ask you for even more men. He's badly shaken. The thing he was determined wasn't going to happen has just happened, and for the first time since we got here, he doesn't know what to do.

No, that's not true. He knows, but he really, really doesn't want to do it...

From Aelius:

... Therefore I feel that, having weighed up the available options and their likely chances of success, the only way to crush the insurgency before it has a chance to grow to unmanageable proportions is to seek out the enemy and destroy him.

This would entail advancing into the forest, which I am exceedingly reluctant to do. Our main advantages are in numbers and superior tactical ability. Both these advantages would be negated, quite possibly turned against us, in the forest. A large army is easier to harass in such conditions than a small one. Our techniques are tailored to fighting in the open. It is easy to imagine how a large column, necessarily strung out over a considerable distance, could be ambushed, pressurised by means of constant hit-and-run attacks, trapped, dispersed and slaughtered by a relatively primitive but fanatical enemy.

The alternative, however, is even less attractive. I had hoped, by building so many forts, so close together, that an attack such as the one we have suffered would not be possible; that assistance would arrive from neighbouring forts before an assault could be pressed home. This would appear not to be the case. We therefore face a long war of slow attrition, each victory inspiring the enemy and demoralising our troops. My belief that the enemy lacks the supplies necessary to survive in the forest would appear to be incorrect; presumably they are able to survive by hunting and gathering. The food reserves at the fort were burnt, not looted. I conclude that the enemy are not going hungry.

I am reluctant to order an advance into the forest without first giving you an opportunity to accept my resignation, which I hereby formally offer, and to decide for yourself whether the risk is too great. I shall be grateful, however, if you could communicate your decision to me, or to my replacement, at your earliest convenience, as I suspect that by the time you read this, further attacks will have taken place and the need to choose a course of action will be all the more urgent.

“What’s that you’re reading?” Melsuntha asked. She leaned towards his shoulder; he folded the paper.

“From Aelius,” he said. “Apparently they’ve been sent ten thousand pairs of boots but no laces.” He tucked the folded letter into a pile of other papers. “I suppose that sort of thing is what war is all about, but it’s beginning to get on my nerves.”

“Any news?”

“Nothing happening,” Basso said. “With any luck, it’ll all be over soon, and then we can get back to normal, maybe.”

When she’d gone, he retrieved the letter and put its corner in the lamp-flame. He held it till it burned his fingers. Then he wrote two letters.

To Aelius:

Proceed as outlined. I take full responsibility. Keep this letter.

To Bassano:

Under no conditions are you to go with Aelius into the forest. Yell at me when you get back, but don’t even consider disobeying. If things go wrong—well, they already have, obviously. If Aelius is unlucky in the forest, it’ll probably be the end of me, and possibly the Bank as well. If Aelius doesn’t go into the forest, it’ll quite definitely be the end of the Bank and me; we’ve run out of money, and unless we can get the mines going on time, there’s going to be an almighty mess. You, therefore, are not going to go into the forest. Someone’s got to survive to sort things out, and look after your mother, and Melsuntha.

Just in case I haven’t expressed myself clearly: do not go with Aelius into the forest. Understood?

There were the government couriers, three classes: regular, urgent and the First Citizen’s personal post. The urgent post had way-station relays, and its couriers rode from dawn to dusk, stopping only to change horses. The First Citizen’s post-riders rode through the night.

There were also the Bank messengers, three classes: regular, urgent and first-class. Only Basso used the first-class. It had its own way stations, and reckoned to reach any destination anywhere in two-thirds of the time the First Citizen’s post would have taken. It kept no records, no logs of letters sent or delivered. Basso gave his two letters to a Bank messenger and told him, first-class.

Exactly what happened isn’t clear. Something happened to the messenger somewhere in Mavortis. His horse and body were never found, but his saddle was discovered on the bank of the Vispartha River by a government regular courier, who fortunately recognised the livery and realised that the saddlebag almost certainly contained important dispatches.

He found two: one addressed to General Aelius, the other to Bassianus Licinius, the First Citizen's nephew.

Again, the reasons why the courier did what he did are not entirely clear. Most likely, he assumed that the letter to Aelius was vitally urgent and had to be delivered as soon as possible; the letter to Bassano was personal, and therefore could wait. The fact that he separated the two letters, handing in the letter to Bassano at the next way station while going on himself to deliver Aelius' letter personally, can be explained if we assume that the courier didn't know that Bassano was with Aelius.

In any event, Basso's letter to Bassano arrived late in the afternoon of the following day, by which time Bassano had already left with the army.

Fifteen

From Bassano:

... So, unless I hear from you, I'm definitely going. Can't pretend I want to; for one thing, it's going to be very uncomfortable and sordid, camping out in the woods and walking all day long carrying a ridiculously heavy pack (no riding horses, even for the gentry; every horse we've got will be carrying supplies). In my opinion, that's taking healthy exercise to unnecessary extremes. There's also the small matter of hostile activity. Essentially, we're doing exactly what they want us to. The fact that we know this doesn't make it any better. I'm very, very scared, Uncle Basso, and I wish I didn't have to go.

But I do have to; no possible doubt whatsoever about that. I came along to watch. I told myself, I'm just here to study an interesting phenomenon: the Vesani state at war. I'd observe, take notes, gather data, so that when I got home I'd be able to analyse the information I'd gathered and draw intelligent conclusions relevant to a wide range of social, political and moral issues. This would make me a better person, prepare me for the role you've got lined up for me and possibly contribute to the sum of human knowledge and understanding, assuming I had the time and energy to pen a few exquisitely written monographs. I was happy with that. I could be here without having to take part (like a miserable child at a party). I'd have all the good stuff I wanted, without having to pay for it with guilt and complicity.

Doesn't work like that. Being here with the army, watching them, learning, I've come to realise that morality is an illusion, ethics is an

intellectual exercise. All that matters is sides: our side, their side. Sides are everything. All I want is for our side to win, no matter what, no matter how bad we have to be.

Everything's sides, isn't it? Deep down, where the real reasons are. Your family, your friends, your business, your country—layers of the proverbial onion, of course. As each layer gets peeled off, you make your choices in the next layer. If you've got to betray your country or your Bank, you betray your country. If it's between the Bank and your friends, you choose your friends. If it's between friends and family, you side with your family. Sides. There's no logic to it. You can't even call it a matter of faith or belief; you believe in the Invincible Sun because He embodies all virtue and goodness—if He was an arsehole, you wouldn't worship him. Sides are more fundamental than that. Sides are what you are. If you're on the losing side, tough.

I learned that looking at dead bodies. All soldiers are brave, even the ones who get killed while running away. But the winning-side dead are heroes and the losing-side dead were just suckers who deserved it. The men who robbed the Treasury must've been brave as lions to do what they did. So are most murderers; burglars, even. You must have balls like a camel to break into a stranger's house in the middle of the night, knowing perfectly well you could be killed, or have your leg ripped off by vicious dogs, or you could slide off the roof and break your neck. Think of the risks rapists run, or even the people who defraud their employers. You take a conscious decision to run a risk, and if it all goes wrong you lose everything and end up in jail. You've got to be really brave to do that stuff. And courage is a wonderful virtue, yes?

Ditto loyalty, integrity, determination, faith; ingenuity, perseverance, resourcefulness, patience; all the burglar's virtues are top-flight, first-division excellent qualities. So are his motivations: to feed his starving kids, acquire wealth to make a better life for himself and his family. Your burglar is a man of character, of quality, of many virtues. You only get pissed off at him because it's your stuff he steals. He's on one side, you're on another. I can't really see much difference between stealing silver tableware and stealing silver ore, breaking into houses and breaking into countries. Morality's just the winning side awarding itself a medal.

So I've got to go where my side goes, unless you tell me not to (the supervening imperative of the innermost layer of onion); to stay behind would be to deny the only truth I've ever found. Besides, it won't be too bad. My personal cook's been replaced by a Blemmyan; he burns everything and then swamps the embers with olive oil. If I stay here, I'll only have Segimerus to talk to, and I've grown heartily sick of him. It's starting to get hot here, and apparently, deep inside the forest the temperature is always just right, not too hot in summer, not too cold in winter. They say it's the same down a mine shaft, but I'll take their word for that.

Mostly, I suppose, I want to say thanks for sending me here. If I hadn't come, I'd never have learned the truth. I guess that if I'm anything, I'm a philosopher (what do you want to be when you grow up, Bassano?); cracking the fundamental question of ethics and the purpose of human existence before the age of twenty-one is about as good as you can get, in my line of work. It's also a dead end—nowhere else to go, nothing left to do—so the risk really isn't that great. If I'd stayed in the City, I could've lived to be ninety and never achieved a damn thing.

*Cordially, and with love,
Bassano*

"I'm afraid not," the soldier told him patiently. "No matter how quickly we get there, they'll be deep inside the forest by then."

"So?" Basso snapped. "Something the size of our army can't be hard to find, even with a few trees in the way. Just follow all the footprints."

"A courier," the soldier went on, wisely ignoring him, "would probably be picked off by the insurgents long before he could catch up with the army. If he made it through and found them, it would be extremely unwise for your nephew to leave the army and go back, for the same reason."

"The hell with that," Basso said. "Aelius'll have to send a regiment to escort him. He's got seven, he can spare one, can't he?"

Maybe the soldier was deaf, in both ears. "It's my considered opinion," he said, "that any attempt to retrieve Bassianus Licinius would put him in greater danger than if he stayed with the main army. General Aelius has twenty-eight thousand men, all well armed and well trained. I'm certain that

he will regard preserving the life of your nephew as a high priority. Anything we do from here will probably only make things worse.”

Basso shook his head. “I can’t accept that,” he said. “Go to the forest, find the army and tell Aelius to turn round and come back. We can do that, can’t we?”

The soldier didn’t reply, which was probably just as well. He was a very patient man, with an inexpressive face. Basso said, “What do you make of their chances?”

That was different. The soldier was prepared to treat him as a rational human being. “Given what we know about the terrain and the enemy, naturally I’m deeply concerned. On the other hand, Cazar troops aren’t exactly strangers to fighting this sort of war. And General Aelius is quite possibly the most resourceful and determined soldier I’ve ever come across. Most certainly he knows what the dangers are, and he’ll have made plans accordingly. The great military disasters of history, where large armies have gone into mountains or forests and never come back, were mainly the fault of inexperienced or overconfident commanders.”

Basso nodded. “Their principal mistake being walking straight into a trap in the first place. Which Aelius has just done.” He stood up, turned his head as though looking for something, then sat on the edge of the desk. “Well, we’ll just have to wait and see. What else?”

The soldier hesitated, and in that split second Basso knew he was about to hear something bad. He very nearly interrupted; but what would be the point?

“We’re getting reports that the Imperial Second Fleet has left its spring harbour at Flobis and put to sea,” the soldier said. “One source, unconfirmed but usually reliable, says that they’re making for Voroe.”

Just for a moment, Basso couldn’t remember where Voroe was. “The island,” he said. “The one we turned the Hus loose on.”

The soldier nodded. “As I said, just one report. However, if the Empire is contemplating war, Voroe would be an ideal place to start, and of course, this would be the ideal time. If the Empire has learned that Aelius has gone into the forest...”

“Yes, I see.” Basso was lying. For some reason, he couldn’t get his mind to close around the fact he’d just been given. “They’ve got a claim to Voroe,

so it's a legitimate act on their part, and if they take it, they cut our supply line to Mavortis. Nasty thought. What should we do?"

A question, where at any other time he'd have given an order. The soldier replied immediately, "Mobilise the fleet. Send four full squadrons to Voroe and get ready to fight."

"Mobilise the fleet." Basso frowned. "I can see the sense in that," he said awkwardly. "Trouble is, there's no money to pay for it. To supply, man and launch a squadron: three hundred thousand nomismata. To keep a squadron at sea for a week, sixty thousand. Four squadrons for, say, three weeks: one million, seven hundred and twenty thousand—"

"One million, nine hundred and twenty thousand," the soldier corrected him. Basso opened his mouth, then closed it again. First time he'd got a sum wrong for as long as he could remember. "We can't afford it," he said. "Not even with pretend money. The most we can do is two squadrons, and that's if the Bank spends its own money." He scowled, as though irritated by someone he couldn't see but knew was there. "Should we do that?"

"The report could be false," the soldier said, "in which case the money would be wasted. If the report is true and we do nothing, the consequences don't bear thinking about." He hesitated, then asked gently, "Is it true about the money, or are you exaggerating?"

"It's true," Basso said. "It's gone. I've spent it." He pressed his thumbs to the sides of his head. "How long can we wait before launching the ships?" he said. "In case we get further and better reports."

"A matter of days," the soldier replied, "less than a week. If the Imperial navy gets there first, of course, the job will be twice as hard."

Basso nodded. "Can we do it with two squadrons?"

"The Second Fleet consists of three full squadrons," the soldier recited. "Since our unit structure was copied from the Empire, in theory our squadrons should be equivalent to theirs. However, we have reason to believe that their new-generation warships are bigger and faster than ours and carry considerably more artillery and marines. At a conservative estimate, I would say that three of their squadrons would be equivalent to four of ours."

Basso had his eyes tight shut. "Then it'll have to be four," he said. "It's all right about the money, I'll think of something. Who's the best man to command?"

“Aelius,” the soldier replied sadly. “In his absence, I really couldn’t say. There are six or seven possibilities, with very little to choose between them.” He smiled grimly. “Command of the navy has always been the reserve of the best Vesani families, and we haven’t had to fight at sea for over a generation. We have some excellent theorists, but—”

“I’m sorry,” Basso said abruptly, “I seem to be having trouble concentrating today. Go away and come back with a recommendation for who’s going to command the fleet. Maybe by then my head’ll have cleared.”

“Do you want me to ask the clerks to draw up the mobilisation orders?” the soldier asked. “We need them in place before we can—”

“Yes, thanks, that’s fine.” The soldier noticed that Basso was squeezing his left hand extremely hard with his right. “If I can leave all the arrangements to you and your people, that’d be splendid. Thank you.” It was a dismissal, and the soldier left.

It took Basso half an hour not to pour himself a large glass of brandy. Then he tried paperwork, but it might as well have been in a foreign language. He sent for Tragazes, and did nothing useful in the hour it took him to arrive.

“We need to borrow a million nomismata,” Basso said. “Which of the banks has got that kind of money?”

Tragazes mentioned a few names. “But I doubt whether they’ll lend to us,” he said.

“Why not?”

“They suspect we’re overcommitted,” Tragazes said. “Which of course we are. Besides, they’re struggling to maintain their own reserves.”

Basso nodded. “What can we sell? Quickly, I mean. How about the shipyard?”

Might as well have asked him the way to the library. “No,” he said. “It’s a restricted asset. It can only be sold to the government or another Vesani-owned concern. Nobody who meets those criteria could afford to buy it.”

“Sell it cheap,” Basso said. “One million.”

“Even at that price.”

Basso drummed his fingers on his knees. “All right, then,” he said, “how about our share in the Mavortine mines? We must be able to get a million for that, even in these awkward times.”

“It’s possible,” Tragazes said quietly. “Would you like me to make enquiries?”

“Yes. No,” Basso said quickly. “Enquiries will mean our stock’ll crash overnight. Let’s start at the beginning. Who’s got that kind of money?”

The list was shorter than he’d expected. “And I think we can eliminate the Fair Outcome and the Herennii. They’re extremely unlikely to do anything that would help us, even if they stood to make a lot of money.”

Basso scratched his head. “All right,” he said. “Sound out the Spiritual Union. Make it sound like we’ve got some really big thing going, so big we’re happy to sell off the family silver to pay for it.”

“I’ll try,” Tragazes said levelly. “Was there anything else?”

“I need a million nomismata in the next forty-eight hours,” Basso said. “I think that’s enough for you to be going on with.”

Cinio wanted to see him, but he made excuses. There was a war supplies committee meeting; more excuses. He went home, spent a long time in the library looking for a book, then sat down by the window and started reading it. Velleius’ *Noble History*; his mother used to read it to him when he was a boy and ill in bed, in between dosing him with her appalling medicines. He read two chapters, then put it back on the shelf.

Command of the fleet was awarded to Servilius Gnatho. Basso announced the appointment to the House when he informed them about the naval expedition to Voroe. He was, he said, exercising his prerogative power as First Citizen; therefore, there would be no debate and no vote. For security reasons, he was not at liberty to disclose why the expedition was necessary. He walked out of the chamber in dead silence, and went home again.

Gnatho wanted to see him. He didn’t want to see Gnatho, but decided he had to. The new admiral of the fleet was about thirty-two years old, tall and remarkably handsome, a laureate of the Studium and author of several influential monographs on naval tactical theory. He’d been on a ship once, as far as Auxentia; he came home the long way, by land.

“I’ve got no idea whether you’ll have to fight or not,” Basso said. “It could be a false alarm, you could be on your way to the most important sea battle in Vesani history. If I were you, I’d assume the latter.”

Gnatho was still stunned. He said: "Shouldn't we have seen this coming?"

Basso looked at him. "You're the bloody naval expert. Did you?"

"No." Gnatho licked his lips, like a cat. "I confess, the possibility didn't occur to me. However, I'm not in the inner loop for intelligence reports."

"There's just the one report, and you've just seen it," Basso said sharply. "Now you know just as much as I do. I assume you can take it from here."

Gnatho looked as though he'd been told it was his turn to muck out the lions. "Naturally you'll want to be consulted about the—"

"No," Basso said. "I don't know anything about naval warfare. Correction: I know just enough to be dangerous. Go away, get on with it and try not to spend any more money than you can help."

Naturally, Basso had Gnatho closely watched. As far as he could tell, from the reports and his extensive reading, everything was being done more or less right, and Gnatho certainly wasn't hanging about.

There were fifty thousand names on the naval reserve register; every Vesani with any seafaring experience was obliged to register, and in theory was subject to call-up on thirty-six hours' notice. Four squadrons called for twenty thousand men: ten thousand oarsmen, five thousand deck hands, four thousand artillerymen and marines and a thousand officers of various grades. Aelius had made sure the register was up to date, had stockpiled conscription notices and trained the City Guard for press-gang duty. Of the fifty thousand, twelve were unavailable because they were already at sea, serving on merchant vessels. The gangs had relatively little trouble catching the twenty thousand slowest-running draftees, who were rounded up in Portway Square, issued with three days' rations and basic kit, and marched down to the docks, where a hundred warships, built not by the government but by the Severus yards, were ready to be hauled out of their sheds, loaded and launched. It was a long time since the Vesani had had to make good on their boast that they could launch a fleet in forty-eight hours. To everybody's surprise, they were ready with forty minutes to spare.

The first, and best, copy of the great map had been pasted to the top of a table in the cabinet room. The idea had been to have little statues carved to represent the various units, but nobody had got around to it. Basso had

therefore sent out for a dozen chess sets. The castles stood (reasonably enough) for castles. The knights were Hus cavalry units. Archpriests, black queens and black kings were infantry divisions, represented according to size and quality. The white king was Aelius. White pawns were Vesani auxiliary units. The black pawns were the enemy.

It had been a good enough idea at the time, but it didn't work. There simply wasn't enough room on the one road that led into the forest for such a large number of pieces. Someone had suggested removing them all and replacing them with dried beans (each with the name of its unit inscribed on it in tiny letters), a suggestion which made Basso angry. He'd had all the chess pieces packed away and replaced with small wooden chips.

A great many people wanted to know where he was. A smaller but significant number knew he was in the war room, as it had become known, but nobody was being let through without explicit instructions. Gnatho had been in there, for about ten minutes, on his way to the docks. Tragazes had spent an hour in there, and come out looking as though he'd died peacefully and been skilfully embalmed. Various clerks from the Bank had been in and out; nobody knew who they were, and they wouldn't speak to anybody. A few servants had gone in with food and drink, or to empty the chamber pot. They were slightly more forthcoming, but not much—

“What's he doing in there?”

“Sitting.”

“What else?”

“Nothing. Just sitting.”

“Where?”

“By that big table with the map on it.”

“He must be doing something.”

“No.”

A secretary was sent for, and came out holding a letter, his hand carefully clamped over the address. Furio, the interior minister, stood in the ante-room doorway and wouldn't let him past.

“Show me the letter,” he said.

The secretary apologised. Not allowed. Very sorry. Furio stayed where he was.

“Let the man go,” Sentio said. “He's only doing his job.”

“I want to know who he's writing to.”

The secretary cleared his throat. That, he said, polite and sad, was unfortunately not possible. Furthermore, he had to insist that the minister stand aside and let him through. He was, he pointed out, authorised to use force if obstructed.

“Like hell you are,” Furio said. “I’m a member of the cabinet and an elected representative of the Vesani people. Lay one finger on me and I’ll have you strung up.”

The secretary repeated his request twice. Then, moving deceptively quickly, he grabbed Furio’s arm, twisted it behind his back, moved him eight inches to the right and left the room through the resulting gap.

There was a long silence after that. Then Sentio said, “I think I’ll go back to my office now. If anyone wants me, I’ll be there till sixish.”

The room emptied quickly. Furio hung on for a while, with only the guards for company, then left the House and went home to draft his resignation.

Three days after the fleet sailed, Melsuntha came. She told the guards she wanted to see her husband. Sincere apologies; not possible.

“Tell him I’m here,” she said.

They did. Still not possible. She left immediately.

There were several emergency sessions of the House. Since the First Citizen was not present, and since he had not replied to the members’ demand that he appoint a deputy to take his place while he was indisposed, no motions could be officially lodged and no votes taken. This didn’t stop the House from debating, lodging motions and voting on them, even though they all knew they were wasting their time. Among the motions passed was one to strictly curtail the First Citizen’s prerogative powers, with particular regard to the declaration and conduct of war and the right to govern without the House in wartime. Written copies of these motions were taken to the war room, but the guards were under orders not to take in anything from the House in session. The leaders of the Opposition therefore tried stuffing them under the door, but there wasn’t quite enough room; they got stuck halfway and stayed there.

The leading experts in constitutional law, two lecturers from the Studium, were sent for. They told the House that no established procedure existed for the removal of a First Citizen who became insane during his term of office. The nearest thing they could come up with was a general bill of impeachment, which would require the assent of two-thirds of the members of the House, together with certificates from the Patriarch of the Studium and the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. A motion was passed by the House amending these provisions—a simple majority would henceforth suffice, and the certificates were dispensed with. When they went to stuff a copy of this under the war-room door, they discovered that their earlier communiques were still there, still stuck, and there wasn't room to get even the corner of the page into the crack.

The Optimate faction, which had grown considerably since the fleet sailed, chose a new leader: Raetius Stabularius, head of the Fair Outcome Mutual Bank, brother-in-law of the chairman of the Spiritual Union, the new owner of the Severus shipyard and a considerable portion of the Charity & Social Justice's stake in the Mavortine mines.

Stabularius, or his advisers, came up with a new approach. A man convicted of a serious criminal offence, such as murder, could not be First Citizen. Should the offence be committed while the First Citizen was in office, he could only be tried for it if he was impeached first. But (Stabularius argued) if the offence had been committed many years before Bassianus Severus was elected to office, the requirement for impeachment would not apply; he could be tried, *in absentia* if need be, and if convicted would automatically be discharged from office. Furthermore, if a House committee, on taking relevant advice from leading experts, were to declare him insane and therefore unfit to plead, he could be tried *in absentia* even if he was physically present in the City.

In the event, it was a close-run thing. The only vote needed was to ratify the selection of the committee to hear the medical evidence. The Optimates lost the vote, though only by six wards. Government supporters claimed that even if the vote had gone the other way it would've been invalid, since neither the First Citizen nor his appointed deputy had been present in the Chamber when it was taken; a fact which, though perfectly true, appeared

to have slipped the minds of the assembled membership when the vote was called for.

“They could still try him if they could get him out of the war room,” Sentio pointed out.

“They’d need soldiers for that,” Cinio replied. “So far, the military’s squarely behind us.” He paused, then added: “This might not be the case if anything happened to Aelius, of course. It’s him they’re loyal to, not us.”

“What about Basso? Are they loyal to him?”

“I have absolutely no idea.” Cinio leaned back in his chair, looking tired. He hadn’t shaved for three days, and the stubble on his chin made him look like a tramp, in spite of his elegant gown. “It all depends on this fucking war,” he said. “If we win something in the next ten days, none of this will ever have happened. If Aelius gets killed, even if we win something, we’re probably all dead. If we lose something but Aelius survives, it’ll all depend on the general staff, and I for one haven’t a clue what they think about anything.” He grinned painfully. “I’ve put some of my people in there as caterers and servants, but whenever someone enters a room in headquarters, they all start talking in Cazar. I’m trying to find a Cazar-speaker who can pass for a barmaid, but so far, no joy.”

A messenger arrived in the early hours of the morning, nine days after the departure of the fleet. He was stopped at the front gate of the House; understandably so, since he was dirty, wild-looking and armed. He gave his name as Velleio Ripilio, and claimed to be a commander in the navy.

An hour later, a guard captain arrived and was taken to see him in the cells at the back of the guardhouse. Ripilio produced his commission, signed by General Aelius and bearing the seal of the adjutant-commander of the Navy. The captain had never seen anything like it before and had no idea if Aelius’ signature was genuine, so he sent to the Navy Office for confirmation. It was shut, of course; the nightwatchman found a piece of paper with the name of the officer who kept the duty rosters, who’d be able to say who was the right person to wake up.

Two hours later, the duty officer arrived at the guardhouse and was able to confirm that the commission was genuine. Ripilio was immediately taken back to the House, where the First Citizen agreed to receive him.

From Gnatho:

... Able to report that the enemy fleet has turned back and was last seen heading south-east, on a course that would take it directly to its home port at Flobis.

As yet, we have not been able to quantify either our losses or theirs with any degree of accuracy. I believe (but cannot confirm) that we have lost twenty-one ships sunk, seven more damaged beyond recovery; extensive damage to a further thirty-seven. Of the remaining thirty-five ships, thirty-two are probably fit for active service without requiring immediate repair. As to casualties, the figure would seem to be somewhere between six and eight thousand dead or unaccounted for; at least three thousand whose wounds render them unfit for duty.

Enemy losses are even harder to assess. At this point, I believe that we sank nineteen of their ships, and a further three are believed to have been so extensively damaged that they are no longer seaworthy and will sink or be scuttled before they reach Flobis. I can state with a degree of confidence that we have captured twenty-six enemy ships: twelve intact, the rest damaged to a greater or lesser degree. We have no way of knowing the scale of enemy casualties, beyond the assumption that among the crews of the nineteen sunk ships, amounting to some seven thousand men, survival rates were low; we hold something of the order of four thousand prisoners rescued from the sea. Imperial policy is not to pick up enemy survivors, so we cannot assume that they hold an equivalent number of our missing.

To summarise: we have driven off the enemy, and Voroe is secure. My belief is that the enemy fleet is in as bad a state as our own, possibly worse, and therefore poses no immediate threat; the Empire, of course, has an estimated nineteen further squadrons at its disposal, although these forces are mostly stationed a great distance away and have other responsibilities to attend to. Our losses, in ships and men, have been considerable, and at this time I consider that we have only one and a half squadrons available for immediate deployment. We also lack supplies, materials for repair, and ammunition for our artillery.

Although I do not intend to describe the conduct of the action in any detail, pending my full report, which should reach you within the next three days, I should perhaps stress the last point. Our victory, if it can be described as such, was largely due to the superiority of our ship-mounted

artillery, in particular the light mangonels and scorpions. Had it not been for the advantage these gave us, I do not doubt that the result would have been very different. In terms of tactical ability and general seamanship, the Imperial navy is more than a match for us—a fact which you may perhaps wish to consider further.

“The impression I got,” Sentio said, “was that he was disappointed. Not the letter he was hoping for. Still,” he went on, “at least he’s talking to us again.”

The general consensus of opinion was that it was the most dramatic session of the House in living memory. The prolonged absence of the First Citizen, Stabularius’ attempts to get rid of him, his extraordinary entry, unannounced, in the middle of a debate; the way he stalked (several witnesses used the word independently) across the Chamber to his seat, in dead silence, with everybody staring: it was theatre or melodrama, depending on affiliation and point of view, but nobody could deny it was memorable.

No preamble. The Vesani navy, he said, in a loud, steady voice, had defeated a substantial Imperial fleet off Voroe. Had the Empire taken Voroe, the consequences would have been disastrous for the Republic; however, thanks to the decisive action of Admiral Gnatho and the skill and courage of the fleet, the threat had been averted. It was no exaggeration, he said, to say that they had saved the Republic.

Exact casualty figures, he went on (total silence), were not yet available. Losses had, however, been heavy on both sides. However, he was assured by the admiral that, out of a total in excess of one hundred, twenty-two enemy ships had been sunk and a further twenty-eight captured. The Vesani fleet would, of course, remain at Voroe until it could be confirmed that the remnants of the Imperial armada had returned to their home port.

A longer pause, and the intensity of the silence made the members nervous. Then he resumed his address. It had come to his attention, he said, that over the last few days, when he had been concentrating all his time and energy on the Voroe crisis and had therefore (much to his regret) not been able to attend sessions of the House, there had been a number of misguided

attempts to pass illegal legislation. He found this difficult to believe. His isolation, made necessary by the requirements of absolute security, had not been of his choosing; it would sadden and disappoint him if he thought that members of the House had tried to exploit a national emergency for party political ends. The Attorney General had advised him that it was his duty to take legal action against those members who had proposed the illegal motions; the law on such breaches of privilege, he was informed, was very clear and gave him no choice but to pursue the offenders and press for the maximum penalty, death by hanging. However, he believed (if he was in error, no doubt the House would put him straight) that his prerogative powers allowed him to pardon those responsible; accordingly, before attending the current session, he had done so. Signing the necessary warrants had made him late for the session, and he apologised to the House for this discourtesy.

Finally (he went on), it was his unpleasant duty to inform the House that, in order to pay for the Voroe expedition, he would be obliged to levy a subsidy tax, in order to raise the sum of two million nomismata. This sum he had personally advanced to pay the costs of the expedition, there being no time to raise the money from the Treasury through the proper channels. As always, it was his privilege and honour to serve the state in any way he could; however, the loan of such a sum had put a degree of pressure on the legally required reserves of the Bank of Charity & Social Justice, whose stability was of vital importance to the Republic at this time. Accordingly, the tax would be levied in the first instance through the banking system, the sums due being taken direct from the accounts of all corporations and individuals with a registered net worth in excess of fifty thousand nomismata. The necessary mandates had already been drawn up, and were being executed even as he spoke. There would, of course, be an appeals procedure, should any person or corporation believe he had been excessively taxed, all appeals to be heard once the emergency powers relating to the Mavortine emergency had expired.

It only remained (he said) for him to propose a vote of thanks to Gnatho and the officers and men of the fleet in recognition of the value of their service to the Republic, and accordingly he commended the motion to the House.

“Well?” she asked him. “Did we actually win, or...?”

“Just about.” He was having trouble unbuckling his left shoe; he was using his left hand, which didn’t work, because he was too tired to move so he could use his right. “I haven’t had time to read the report properly, but it looks like they’d have taken us apart if it wasn’t for the artillery. I don’t know how long it’ll take the Imperials to upgrade theirs, but when they do, we’re in trouble.” He shook the shoe off his foot. It shot under the bed, and she retrieved it.

“That’s bad,” she said.

“Tomorrow’s disaster,” he said. “Don’t have to think about it today. If the Empire was all I had to worry about, I’d be a happy man.”

She frowned. “But everything’s sorted out, isn’t it? You’ll get the money back, from the tax.”

Basso laughed. “You know what,” he said, “that’s just a drop in the ocean. There’s no money, not anywhere.” He lay back on the bed and closed his eyes. “Fact is,” he said, “the Empire’s beaten us just by launching its bloody fleet. I was relying on a two-million tax as a last reserve. Now I’ve had to use it to cover a naval battle I didn’t want and can’t afford, which hasn’t done anybody the slightest bit of good, and my last-ditch rainy-day money’s gone for ever. There’s an enormous hole in the Treasury, the Bank’s this close to going under; if they start production in the mines a couple of days later than scheduled, we’re quite probably screwed. And Aelius is in the forest, costing me a fortune, probably going to get himself killed, and then what?” He breathed out, long and slow. “Truth is, I’ve been stealing from myself for months, just to keep things going. It’ll be all right, I kept telling myself, the mines’ll cover it, all I need to do is fool people for a few weeks until the ore starts flowing.”

“But what’s gone wrong with the Bank?” she asked.

“Oh, that. Simple. I ran out of public money—that’s real money, not pretend—so I started spending my own. Well, the Bank’s. Of course, most of the Bank’s money isn’t mine, it belongs to the investors. But it was there, and I needed it, and I was writing myself little bits of paper promising to pay myself back. My brilliant idea about paper money was the point where it got out of control. Fifty thousand to pay the corn merchants? Easy, just give them a bit of paper. We can’t be bankrupt, I told myself, we’ve still got reams and reams of paper and gallons of ink.” He coughed and caught his

breath. "I blame Antigonus," he said. "He had no call to die just when I needed him."

He could feel her looking at him, but avoided her eye. "It can't be that bad," she said.

"Don't you believe it." He stretched out his legs, until he felt strain in his kneecaps. "I've never been one to let lack of money keep me from buying something I want, even in the best of times. Something always happens, and it sorts itself out. I used to think I had drive and vision and a big perspective, and details were for the little people to deal with. Maybe this time I've gone just a little bit too far."

She was still looking at him. "You can't go on like that," she said. "You've got to do something about it."

"Too late." He grinned. "Just got to hang on tight and hope it'll clear itself. In theory, it should. Mavortis is one great big stockpile of valuable materials: metals, timber. If we could have wrapped this war up in half the time, like I thought we would, there'd have been no problem. But as it is, we're stuck."

"If Aelius wins..."

"If," Basso repeated. "But yes, if he wins, and the insurgency's sufficiently squashed so we can mine in peace, I can probably lie and fiddle and bugger around long enough to see us right, more or less; we'll be no better off than if we'd never heard of Mavortis, but at least we won't be completely ruined. If Aelius loses..."

"You're not really worried about the money, are you?"

"No, of course not." He sat up slowly, like someone who's just woken up and doesn't want to go to work. "The thing is, under normal circumstances I'd be *concentrating*. I'd be taking a bloody interest. As it is, I can't really be bothered with the Republic and the Bank, my mind's not on the job. Which is the real reason it's all got into such a mess. My fault."

"He'll be all right," she said. "You'll see."

That just made Basso angry. He twisted off the bed, stalked to the door, stopped and turned back; a lion in a cage, in majestic possession of seven paces, ridiculous and sad. "The crazy part of it is," he said, "I chose to do it. I made a conscious decision to put the only human being I love on this earth in mortal danger. Seemed like a good idea at the time. For all I know, he's

already dead, in the forest somewhere, with crows picking at his eyes. Of all the bloody stupid things.”

She didn’t say anything (because she agreed with him). He rubbed his forehead with the heel of his hand, as if everything he’d done was an itch he could scratch away.

* * *

The Cardinal of Auxentia wrote him a nice letter congratulating him on the victory. It took him a moment or so to remember who the Cardinal was. Then he remembered: the fat man who’d sat on the throne when he lost the election. Well, he thought. Esteem from such a source is esteem indeed.

Tragazes was most anxious to speak to him. He guessed why, and wasn’t available. It occurred to him that hiding from his own employee was hardly the action of a rational man; a bit like lying to himself. Well.

News from Mavortis; from one of the Bank’s messengers, just returned. Nothing concrete, but as he’d skirted the southern edge of the forest on his way back to the coast, he’d seen movement and heard shouting, deep inside. He’d stopped (brave man, Basso thought) and tried to peer between the trees, but he couldn’t make anything out. Could’ve been fighting; could’ve been a boar-hunt or, just possibly, children playing. He’d hung around as long as he dared, but nobody came out. Meanwhile, the soldiers in several of the forts where he’d stopped to change horses were complaining about shortages of food and essential equipment; they were having to clean their armour with gravel, because they hadn’t had a delivery of white sand for a month, and the special twine for tying feathers to arrow-shafts was just about to run out. Also, they hadn’t been paid for six weeks, not even in paper. They assumed it was just an administrative cock-up, and could he please mention it when he got home?

Other news. An outbreak of plague in southern Permia (see map). An entire city wiped out. He saw map, then initialled the bottom of the page, to show he’d read it.

News from Voroe. The fleet had been patched up and was on the point of sailing home when a freak storm hit the bay. Half the ships slipped their

moorings and were blown out to sea; captured Imperial vessels stayed afloat, Vesani ships capsized. Only seven ships sunk, a small miracle, but the whole wretched job of patching up had to be done again. More supplies, more money.

News from Flobis. The Imperial fleet had returned to port and left again almost immediately, to deal with a resurgence of piracy at the other end of the Middle Sea. Hunting pirates (a species misguidedly believed to be extinct) was slow work along the split, frayed edges of the Sea, but it was vital to the security of the Empire's internal trade, and therefore a much higher priority than dealing with the rebel barbarians in the far west.

News from the north. A new warlord had arisen among the Hus, uniting six of the fifteen tribes with a view to conquering the world. This sort of thing happened from time to time. In all probability, the nomad messiah would be murdered by his family and friends; if not, there would be a short, exceptionally bloody civil war, the Hus would temporarily unite and the civilised world would be at risk of wholesale invasion. Recommended that large sums of money be sent to the leaders of the other nine tribes to enable them to bribe the new warlord's followers into getting rid of him. A good idea, but not possible at this time.

News from the exchanges. Following the announcement that no orders for new warships to replace those lost at Voroe were to be placed, the value of shares in the Severus yard, recently floated by its new owners, lost half their value in a single day. Further substantial losses in all sectors, including military supplies and hardware. Rumours about the status of all the major banks, leading to panic withdrawals, short-selling of bank stocks, securities and loans. A statement from the Chancellor failed to halt the slide. Government stocks being traded at up to ten per cent below surrender value. The last item made Basso smile; he wrote himself a letter of credit for a hundred thousand nomismata and used the money to buy government stock in the market, which he then redeemed at face value, accepting payment in paper money rather than gold. He lent the ten-thousand-nomismata profit to the government, and used the loan to pay a corn chandler's bill. His intervention halted the run on government stock, which soon afterwards was being traded at fifteen per cent over nominal, and restored confidence in the paper money, which some traders had been refusing to accept.

A by-election in one of the east-side wards; Hortius Columella dropped dead of a heart attack after eating too much salted Blemmyan salmon. Columella's ward, primarily rope-making, cloth-dyeing and financial services, had been marginal, and the Optimates made a frantic bid to secure it, spending over twelve thousand nomismata in the three days of hustings on bribes and sweeteners to the ward marshals, guild officers and other leaders of opinion. In the event, Basso's candidate was elected with a slightly increased majority.

News from Mavortis: none.

From the Imperial governor at Droesen to Segimerus; intercepted, edited, revised, copied out and forwarded.

... A disappointment, but hardly a setback. The most troublesome outcome has been the resurgence in piracy in the Middle Sea. As far as we can gather, the pirates are aware of and have taken seriously the claims made by the Vesani government regarding our losses in the engagement. This has led them to believe that our naval forces are weak and depleted. It will not take us long to convince them of their mistake; at which time, we shall launch a new expedition and recover Voroe for the Empire.

I confess I am disappointed to learn that you have so far failed to establish contact with the leaders of the insurgency. I feel I might be forgiven for imagining a certain want of energy on your part. It is essential that we form some kind of alliance with these people as soon as possible. Once we hold Voroe, we will be in a position to furnish them with arms and war matériel, military advisers and, if necessary, ground troops. Naturally, our aim must be to coordinate our efforts with them, so as to force the Vesani to fight on at least two fronts simultaneously. My understanding is that once the Cazar hunting and transhumance seasons are over, the Vesani will be in a position to recruit substantial additional numbers of Cazar mercenaries. We must therefore see to it that the field army in Mavortis is destroyed before this can happen. Our researches lead us to believe that should the Cazar forces currently contracted to the Vesani suffer significant losses, their countrymen will not enlist, no matter how great the promised rewards.

There are also political aspects to the timing of the Vesani defeat. The First Citizen's term of office has six months to run. It is considered essential that Bassianus Severus should not be re-elected. Massive defeat in Mavortis, followed by a refusal of the remaining Cazars to enlist, should be enough to ensure his fall. As we understand it, his popularity with the electorate is still high, enough to ensure a comfortable victory; he is seen as the champion of the ordinary people against the moneyed interests, and his enfranchisements of resident aliens have given him a solid constituency in wards that would otherwise have been marginal. Of the looming financial crisis, the Vesani electorate know little and understand less; it would be a relatively simple matter for Bassianus Severus to present himself as the only man capable of dealing with the economic crisis, when it comes, and strengthen rather than weaken his political position. The crucial factor will be the development of the Mavortine mines. If Bassianus Severus is able to start production before the election, he is likely to win.

You must, therefore, spare no effort in forming a connection with the insurgents. Once you have done so, you must promise them extensive military aid—please feel free to promise them anything they want—and make it clear to them that the Empire has no ambitions in Mavortis, its only interest being the swift and total defeat of the Vesani. As soon as you have done this, refer back to me immediately. I will then furnish you with a timetable and a summary of our proposed strategy.

You should also offer a personal bounty—say, one hundred thousand hyperpyra each—for the heads of General Aelius and the First Citizen's nephew, Bassianus Licinius. The removal of Aelius will undoubtedly hasten victory, while the death of his nephew will seriously affect Bassianus Severus' ability to govern his people. This should be a perfectly straightforward matter to arrange, and will greatly facilitate our aims in this region.

“It's infuriating that we can't publish it,” Sentio said. “Particularly the bit about getting rid of you being essential to their plans. It'd give you the election on a plate.”

“Maybe later,” Basso said. “Once Aelius is back from the forest. Right now, I daren't let Segimerus know we're on to him.” He grinned.

“Ridiculous thing,” he said. “After Aelius, Segimerus is the most valuable asset we’ve got against the Empire. If we lose him, we’re screwed.”

Cinio said: “I don’t like that bit about the looming financial crisis. If they know we’re up against it...”

But Basso shook his head. “The Empire probably knows more about the finances of the Republic than I do,” he said. “There never was any chance of keeping our business affairs secret from them. What I’d love to be able to do is find out who their agents are, so we could channel disinformation through them, like we’re doing with Segimerus and the war. So far, though, I haven’t been able to; killed a couple and scared off half a dozen more, but that’s not the same thing.” Basso folded the letter and put it in the steel box on his desk. “One thing that did cheer me up,” he said. “They reckon I’m going to win the election. Coming from them, that’s a real vote of confidence.”

And finally, brought in on a grain ship returning from Voroe (held up in port for a week by bad weather and the logjam of crippled warships), a letter. Official military dispatches. News from Mavortis.

Sixteen

From Bassano:

*From: Bassianus Licinius, with the army in Mavortis
To: Bassianus Severus*

I've been trying to decide what order to tell you this in.

Aelius is dead.

We won.

These are supposed to be military dispatches. I'm sorry, I don't know the rules. Besides, my head isn't working properly. Forgive the unmilitary language and structure.

We have sought out and engaged the enemy. After fierce and protracted fighting, involving heavy losses on both sides, we have achieved our objective. The forces of the insurgency have effectively been wiped out. I am confident that I can guarantee security. You may therefore proceed with the next stage of the development plan.

It is with deep regret that I have to inform you of the death of General Aelius. He died in action.

Now, then.

Guess you're wondering why the hell you're hearing from me, not a proper soldier. Long story, parts of it not nice at all.

Uncle Basso, I'm scared and I want to come home. I don't know what possessed me—correction, I do, and if you got my last letter, you do, too. Anyway, my steely resolution lasted till we were out of sight of the edge of

the wood. When the trees closed in, I wasn't nearly so brave or so high-minded any more.

Funny thing, being in a forest. Surprisingly warm, quite often dark as a bag. There comes a point where you get some light coming in from overhead but none at all from the sides. Bit like lying in a coffin with the lid off. A lot of the time I was scared, but mostly all I could think about was how much the calves of my legs hurt. Other aspects of life become ambiguous after a while. Take armour. Marching along in the surprising warm, you really wish you could dump this appalling weight that's crushing your shoulders till you can't bloody breathe. Then you see something move in among the trees (probably just a pig or an elk) and suddenly you really wish you had twice as much metal underwear, plus a shield the size of a door, plus a chain-mail gusset on your trouser fly.

Stopping for a crap is absolutely terrifying. You fall out of line and wander a very few steps away from the road—the road is the way, the truth and the light in a forest; three yards off it and you're in Hell—and you watch the army marching past you while you fumble with your tasset straps and unbuckle your breastplate and take off your cuisses, till you're basically a peeled shrimp; and you squat in the bracken knowing that you'd never see the hand that comes up to cover your mouth while the other hand slides a knife across your jugular vein.

I'm drivelling. Apologies. These are military dispatches, which will be filed in the permanent record. Posterity doesn't need to know about me shitting in the woods.

I have no idea how long we marched for. After the first few days, time just seemed to stop. No way of knowing anything; can't see the position of the sun in the sky, can't see where you are, wouldn't mean anything to you if you could see. Just a load of fairly identical trees, and the road. Sometimes it went up hills, for hour after fucking hour—if ever I do become First Citizen, I shall have all gradients lined up against a wall and shot—sometimes it went down again. Aelius knew where we were, because he had the map. I've got it here in front of me. It's really helpful. There's this enormous splodge with thousands of little drawings of trees, and a straight line up the middle to represent the road. Only the road wasn't straight, and it didn't go through the middle. Otherwise, you couldn't fault it.

We knew what was going to happen. We all knew. There'd be a place where the road gets constricted by some natural feature, probably in a valley or combe with high, thickly wooded sides. They'd have blocked the road, probably by felling trees across it. We'd come up against this barrier and be forced to stop, at which point the air would fill with savage cries and javelins, the enemy would pour down on us from three sides, they'd slaughter us like sheep and then pull out again before we could get ourselves organised. Repeat the procedure until we're all dead. We all knew it would be like that sooner or later. Naturally, we'd planned for it; been over the drills time and time again. First sign of trouble, the three outer files of the column (heavy infantry) form a shield wall (kneeling, standing, innermost file hold shields over heads of other two), the archers marching in the innermost files shoot over the wall to create a no-survivors zone; pioneers at front of column get the obstruction cleared away as soon as possible; under no circumstances is anybody to leave formation or go off the road. The Cazars have huge forests of their own. They do this sort of thing to each other all the time, for politics or fun. Which isn't to say they weren't brown-trouser scared all the time, but at least they had a procedure to believe in; do exactly what we've practised, and we should be all right.

It wasn't like that.

It started very gradually. First, it was just one man—a lunatic, presumably. We came round a corner, and there he was: stark naked, standing in the middle of the road, waving a single javelin. He yelled something at us—probably something offensive—threw his javelin at the front rank (hit a shield), then ran like buggery back into the trees. How we laughed.

Next day there were more of them—groups of two or three. They came out of the trees, stood in the road, yelled at us, threw javelins, missed, ran away. Day after that, it happened twenty-six times. Aelius had given an order not to waste arrows on these clowns. Next day, they chucked their javelins from cover, not the open road. One man wounded, several others minor grazes and bruises. That night, more javelins chucked into the camp, at extreme range. Next day, same, but more and more. We told ourselves we didn't give a shit; they chuck spears, the spears bounce off, is that really the best they can do?

Asked Aelius: what's this in aid of? He was taking it very seriously. The enemy, he said, was far more patient and intelligent than he'd at first assumed. All this pantomime was just a series of gradual extended experiments, to gauge our discipline and nerve. He'd been counting; the number and duration of attacks was increasing steadily. We were supposed to notice this. Observe, the enemy was saying, how we can annoy you, round the clock, and you can't do anything at all about it. True, we're only irritating you; but you're the ones who have to win. All we have to do is not lose. And the deeper you go into our woods, the worse it'll be for you.

Days four and five, it was pretty much continuous: a constant drizzle of javelins, rocks, logs rolled down hillsides, trees felled across the road, holes dug in the road; they'd got a river from somewhere and diverted it, presumably quite some time previously, because it turned a quarter of a mile into knee-deep ooze, which we had to squelch through, and there's nothing on earth more physically exhausting than wading through really deep mud. All to the accompaniment of sharp things being thrown at your head by bastards you can't see.

Aelius said it was to wear us down. Well, yes.

Day six, early hours of the morning; we'd all been awake the last two nights, so were past caring, fast asleep. They came out of nowhere. First I heard was the screaming of bloody great trees falling, all around. Clever buggers, they must've sawn them half through a day or so before, so all they had to do was chop the back-cut, and down the trees came. It was like being in a room and the walls cave in on you. So much for our shield wall. As the trees fell, so they came out of the woods, straight at us. Now we've got God only knows how many casualties dead or pinned down screaming under the fallen trees, we can't move up or down the fucking road, they're coming in from the sides; they've got us penned in like sheep between the tree trunks, hardly any room to move; they throw in two volleys of javelins at point-blank to mess us up real good, then follow up with the sword.

The Cazars have been fighting in forests for a thousand years, but they never thought of that.

The javelins didn't kill anybody much; weren't meant to. They were just to deprive us of our shields. Stick a javelin in a shield, you nearly double its weight. They didn't bother with shields, or armour. They came in with long,

stiff swords and bloody great big felling axes; stick you through the joints of your armour or bash your head in. Our archers never got off a shot.

It was at some point during this stage of the engagement that Aelius was killed. I didn't see it, haven't found anybody who did. I like to think he died sword in hand, making himself a mat of dead Mavortines to lie down on. Or maybe a tree fell on his head, I don't know.

It says in the Book that military command is transmitted instantaneously: soon as one officer dies, his next-in-line is automatically in charge. I guess it was like a line of beacons. Aelius dies; Brigader General Phaselis is in command; Phaselis dies; General Euthyphron is in command; Euthyphron dies; and so on. Might not have happened in score-card order; maybe Phrontis died before Acanthides, God only knows. Fact is, there came a point, probably about ten minutes into the proceedings, where there was nobody left. Thinking about it, they knew exactly where in the column the senior officers were likely to be, and they made a point of getting them killed straight away. Cut off the head and the body dies. You know it makes sense.

There was this colonel—dead now, poor bastard, so I won't say his name. He was running up and down, scrambling over tree trunks, dodging spears and savages, desperately trying to find an officer more senior than he was, so he wouldn't have to be in command. You can understand that. Anyway, the stupid bastard found me.

What had I been doing all this time? Not a great deal. Stood there, looking at the tree trunk that had come this close to squashing me to mulch. Savages all around me; Cazars fighting them, getting killed. It was only some time later I stopped to wonder why those Cazars hung around there and fought, rather than scrambling over the tree trunk and getting away. They were fighting to save me. Aelius' orders: safety of Bassianus Licinius top priority. They were letting themselves get killed, being my human shield, and I was too preoccupied to even bloody notice.

When the colonel found me, there was a bit of a lull. I'd even pulled myself together sufficiently to get my sword out of its scabbard and look round for someone to hit, only by then the Cazars had killed them all. Colonel asks me if I've seen so-and-so; no, I haven't, and incidentally, what the fuck is going on? Aelius is dead, he tells me, and so's everybody else,

the entire chain of command. Then he looks at me, and I can practically hear little tumblers click into place in his brick-thick skull.

No way, I tell him. I'm not even a soldier, I'm a civilian.

You're the First Citizen's nephew, he says (and if I give him any lip, he's going to smash my face in); that practically makes you royalty. Anyway, someone's got to do it, and it's fucking well not going to be me, he says.

(And I thought: well, can't do any harm, we'll all be dead in the next twenty minutes anyway. Why not? Seriously, that's exactly my train of reasoning. Why not?)

Of course, my mind immediately went blank. Really blank, blanker than blankness itself. All I could think was: well, so far we've done exactly what they've expected us to do. Therefore, if we do what they aren't expecting, no matter how stupid, it's got to be better, hasn't it?

All right, I told the colonel, get me a horn-blower. A trumpeter. Why? he asks. Don't fucking argue, I say, get me a fucking trumpeter.

He stares at me like I'm mad, then he hauls himself over the tree trunk and he's gone. Well, I thought, probably won't see him again, and I sort of froze—waiting for a savage to come and kill me, I guess. But a few moments later, back he comes, dragging this poor bloody trumpeter.

How loud can you get that thing to blow? I ask. He doesn't answer. Make as much noise as you possibly can, I tell him. So he does. Then I tell the colonel: get up on that tree trunk, yell as loud as you can: at the next horn-blow, everybody go left up the hill, double quick, pass it on.

That's crazy, he says, we can't leave the road.

I bent down, picked up a bit of broken-off spear-shaft, and smacked him round the head with it. Do as I say, I told him.

So he did—up on the tree trunk, yelled; some bastard savage hit him with a javelin and he came tumbling down, stone dead. Never mind that now. I told the trumpeter, Blow, and he made this noise like the Invincible Sun farting into a bucket, and I turned round and started to run up the hill.

For a moment, it wasn't going to work; they were just standing there, too scared to leave the road. I was jumping up and down yelling, Come on, for fuck's sake. They started to move; a few, then a lot, and then the whole army, what was left of it, was running up the hill.

We met savages, sure. But suddenly it was all different. It wasn't what they were expecting; and you know what? There weren't nearly as many of

them as we'd led ourselves to believe. Really there was just a thin cordon—they'd spread themselves thin the whole length of the column, and we couldn't see them so we never knew how thin. We ran into them, messed them up a bit and punched through. We had armour, they didn't. It really does make a difference.

I say we. Overstatement of case. I was running, looking over my shoulder, yelling Come on, follow me, stuff like that, and suddenly there's this horrible man bang in front of me—the enemy, face to face, so close I can smell his sweat.

I am a graduate of the Republic's finest fencing school. I have a bit of paper that certifies that I'm invincible. I froze. He didn't. If some Cazar hadn't barged into him and knocked him off his feet, he'd have cut my head off and I wouldn't have done a damn thing to stop him. It was only some time later I realised I'd dropped my sword, at which point I picked up a big thick bit of stick. Some time later, I bashed a Mavortine over the head with it, so that was all right.

How long we ran I don't know. Quite some time. Then I remember hearing someone in the distance yelling, Hey, they aren't chasing us any more; and I thought, can that be right? So I called a halt. Amazingly, people stopped running, like I was in charge or something.

Then I tried thinking. Well, of course, I thought. They've stopped chasing us, sure. They don't want to get too far off the road. Get away from the road in a forest, you get lost.

But we were so definitively, so absolutely and perfectly lost, it really didn't matter a toss. Also, having accidentally done one thing right, that one thing had suddenly become the cornerstone of my new religion. Whatever we do, we don't go back to the road. Any fucking road. We're alive precisely because we're lost; because we've wandered into the depths of the forest, and no bugger knows where to find us.

There's probably a deep philosophical truth in there somewhere.

So we stopped, and pulled ourselves together, figuratively and literally. Found there were a hell of a lot of us, even though a hell of a lot of us were missing, if you see what I mean. Of course, we had no map, but that was hardly a death blow. We'd gone left off the road so we were heading sort-of-north. My plan, my master strategy, was to keep on going till there weren't any more trees; and if the savages came after us, run away.

I put a bit more effort into it than that. I went round looking for officers—mostly hoping to find someone who'd relieve me of command, but no such fucking luck—and I told them I was in charge now and this is what we're going to do, and any suggestions very gratefully received. Of course, half of them couldn't speak Vesani.

It was the officers, not me, who got the men back into some semblance of order and looking like a bunch of soldiers rather than refugees from a costume party. Well, some of us had shields, most of us had weapons; those that didn't went in the middle, with the shields on the outside. Then we advanced. Well, you honestly couldn't call it an advance. More of a sort of heavily armed stroll.

Now, the next bit is extremely important. I want you to make sure that whatever else they cut out, they leave the next bit in. Please.

I did not, repeat not, know where we were at this point. I had no idea. I was a little boat cast adrift on an ocean of leaf mould under a dappled green-and-brown sky. I thought I was heading due north; in fact, I was proud of the way I was managing to steer us by the very occasional glimpses of the sun I could snatch through the canopy, and the direction of the shadows of the trees, when there were any shadows, which was hardly ever. The one thing I had no intention of doing was returning to the scene of the ambush and sneaking up on the enemy while they looted the baggage and the dead. Though the idea might have some transitory, meretricious appeal to an over-imaginative armchair tactician, in real life it'd be the dumbest thing I could possibly have chosen to do.

The enemy thought so, for sure. Which is why, when I contrived to lead us right round in a fucking circle, they weren't expecting us.

It's hard to reconstruct in the absence of witnesses, and we killed every Mavortine who didn't manage to get away, but my guess is: they blundered on after us until they were too scared to go off the road any further, then they headed back to the ambush site to make a really thorough job of sending us a message. I do know they kept two (2) survivors alive—to send back to tell the nearest garrison commander what they'd seen, because we were just in time to save one of them. All the other survivors, five, six hundred, they nailed alive to trees, ripped open, wound out their guts on sticks. Apparently there's a religious reason. Leaving aside the moral issues, it's not a good thing to do in the circumstances because it's so very labour-

intensive. What with that, and mashing up and destroying every single artefact we'd brought with us, not to mention getting the felled lumber off the road (their road, their lifeline), they were fully occupied—no men to spare for sentry duty.

The hero of this story is some Hus whose name I'll never know, who probably shouldn't even have been on the expedition (Aelius specified: no Hus, too undisciplined), who was scouting ahead of the main rabble. Apparently the Hus can no more not-scout-ahead in unfamiliar territory than breathe underwater; and we felt, if these people want to tire themselves out creeping from bush to bush and hooting like owls, let 'em. Anyway, this Hus saw the enemy just in time, figured out what had happened, came back, told us. By some miracle, I believed him.

What happened after that was pretty straightforward. After all, the men are Cazars. They had a pretty good idea of what needed to be done. All I had to do was say, Right, I want them completely surrounded and sealed in tight before anybody so much as thinks about moving in, and they did all the rest. Very well, too. I stayed right back. My burning thirst for martial glory well and truly quenched some time earlier.

They came and found me when it was over, though I'd more or less guessed by the noise level. No idea of our casualties in the encirclement/butchering phase; the impression I got was single figures (including the poor bastard Hus who made it all possible, of course). Their side: well, nobody would admit to having let through a single man, but we reckon a couple of dozen oozed through the cracks. Nothing is ever perfect, not even wholesale slaughter.

We all felt pretty good about it; even though, as always in these circumstances, it was an incredible amount of hard, gruelling physical slog. Some Cazar told me: you don't actually feel tired when you're smashing heads; it's the next day when everything aches like hell and you wish you were dead. Took his word for it. But anyway: dog-tired, but quietly, ferociously pleased.

We counted the bodies, then just left them to lie; too much work putting our own dead back together and dumping them in a pit. Our losses: four thousand, six hundred and fifty-seven. Theirs: twenty-seven thousand and some.

Since intelligence assured Aelius before we left that the absolute maximum number of insurgents there could possibly be in the whole forest, including support and non-combatants, was twenty-four thousand, I think it's probably safe to assume we got most of them.

Well, we had a good night's rest after that (apart from the poor devils who drew sentry duty, of course); and in the morning we faced up to the fact that we'd permitted ourselves to overlook the previous evening: namely, that the Mavortines had (in pursuit of their religious and cultural agenda) destroyed all the food we'd brought with us.

No exaggeration. They must've worked like men possessed to do so much damage in such a short space of time. I'm guessing: either it's the old ritual-killing-of-objects thing, where you don't just kill your enemy but everything he ever owned or associated with, to wipe him off the face of the earth totally and for ever; or maybe it was to deny a hated enemy food in the afterlife; or maybe even to provide food for the slaughtered enemy in the afterlife as a way of apologising for killing him in the first place. Who knows? Who gives a shit? The point was, there wasn't an unsmashed bacon jar or an unburnt wheat grain or a dried cod fillet not trodden into the mud and jumped on in the whole wreck of our provisions train. Oh, and they'd killed the packhorses too, and gutted them and filled up the body cavities with mud, so we couldn't eat them either.

Your sylvan poets, Tarchannius and the Elemental school, would have you believe that living in forests is the natural, unpolluted state of Man; that all you've got to do is trudge your merry way through the greenwood, plucking this, killing that, washing it down with crystal-clear water from unsullied streams, and you're back with our ancestors in a state of pure and natural virtue, before greed and ambition were our racial downfall. Well, yes. Maybe you, or you and your own true love at a pinch, in berry season. There were twenty thousand of us, and we were starving hungry. Forget food—there wasn't enough water. I used to think the stuff in the old histories about armies drinking rivers dry was dramatic hyperbole, like arrows blotting out the sun. ("In which case," replied our indomitable ancestors, "we'll just have to fight in the shade." All cheer, and sing the School Song.) Actually, it's frighteningly easy. You don't drink it right down to the gravel and the clay, of course. What happens is, you drink off the clean water and kick up the silt at the bottom, which means the river—which in the forest

means the big stream—fouls up into a thick silty muck and stays foul for hours. You can't afford to wait till it clears, because all that means is another five thousand out of your twenty thousand get to swallow a few brackish mouthfuls; in ten hours, ten thousand of your twenty thousand have each drunk a pint of water. It simply doesn't add up. No big deal while we still had barrels and water-skins and bottles: fill 'em at night, in rotation, making sure you get all your capacity full whenever you get the opportunity, like a big enough river or a freshwater lake. But most of us had nothing to carry water in, on account of having left our kit behind when I ordered the retreat during the ambush.

Oh well, I thought, at least we killed a lot of them before we starved and parched ourselves to death. You know what? I actually thought that. Seriously. Like it made it better, as opposed to worse.

After a while my inner logic started telling me: fine, and you'd have had exactly the same problems if you'd read the sun right and managed to lead the army north instead of round in a circle; we'd still all have died of thirst and starvation, and then the savages would've come screaming out of the forest and slaughtering our brave lads in the forts. Some degree of truth in that, but I definitely rationalised it after the event, to excuse myself for the original purely spontaneous thought.

After that, I decided to play a game. Obviously, I told myself, I'm not going to be able to get twenty thousand of us out of this forest alive. Fact faced: can't be done. Accepted. But how'd it be if I played this game: guess the number of survivors I actually do manage to lead out into the sunlight. Five hundred? A thousand? Five thousand? For every five hundred saved, I get a prize—a sausage, or a cup of water, or a century let off my time in Hell being trampled under the hoofs of the horses of the Invincible Sun. Of course, the game would presuppose me being alive at the end, to see if I'd won, so I'd have to survive too. Just a silly game.

Sometimes, that's all it takes. We scraped up as much edible food as we could with potsherds and our fingers, and tied it up in pockets torn from dead men's shredded coats. We figured: the bottom of a smashed gallon jug will carry a pint of water; one pint between ten men may be enough to save one man's life. We were ridiculous, laden down with stupid little parcels and packets, nursing broken barrels and scraps of crockery in our hands as we walked, like put-upon husbands carrying their wives' shopping. Of course,

it was far too little to make any difference, and it slowed us right down, so in that sense it was counter-productive. But it got us into the game, and it was the game that saved us.

How it saved us isn't quite so uplifting and edifying.

As I just said, nursing all that junk slowed us down. It also made us rather quieter, less obvious than the average army on the march. Which, I guess, is why we escaped the notice of the insurgents' wives, children and livestock, coming up the road to meet us.

More guessing: that as soon as the ambush struck and we ran for it and the initial pursuit was called off, they sent for the women and children and food to rejoin them as soon as possible—scared because there were lots of enemy still loose in the woods, I guess, or maybe they were hungry too, or just lonely. Don't know. Don't care. We practically bumped into them; just enough advance warning for a three-quarter envelopment manoeuvre.

Which worked fine. We charged in on three sides, making a hell of a noise. The women and kids ran like hell out the fourth side. Naturally, we didn't pursue. We had no interest whatsoever in massacring innocent, harmless civilians. I expressly ordered, not one of them to be harmed, if at all possible. All we wanted to do was steal all their food and livestock and leave them alone in the heart of the merry greenwood to fend for themselves. I regard that as the mark of a civilised man. Of this particular civilised man, at any rate.

Who knows? Some of them may make it, especially if they figure out their own version of the game. Point is, they may be women and kids, but they're still the enemy. Or at least, they're not Us. Us and Them. Sides.

Dear Uncle Basso, I know perfectly well what I've become, what I've turned into. Maybe it's an effect of the place, or the situation. Maybe, when I'm home again, I'll get better. Right now, I really don't care. No: rephrase. I really don't mind. There's a difference.

Anyway, that's enough from me; how are things at home?

I imagine I'd rather not know. But, as far as I can see, in my capacity as acting unconfirmed viceroy of Mavortis, we will start digging iron, copper, silver and lead precisely on schedule.

Love,

Bassano

“General Aelius,” the lawyer said, “filed a will with the probate registry two days before he left. I have a certified copy here.” He lifted the plain brass tube out of his pocket as if slowly drawing a sword at the start of an exhibition bout, and placed it on Basso’s desk, gently, so as not to wake it. “He appointed you, myself and your nephew Bassianus Licinius as his executors. I have to ask you if you are prepared to accept the appointment.”

“Yes,” Basso said.

“Very well.” The lawyer pinched the tiny collar of parchment just showing above the rim of the tube, and carefully drew out the roll. “I have, of course, read the will, which is quite short and simple. As required by standard procedure, General Aelius listed his assets in the opening declaration. You might care...”

Basso nodded, and the lawyer unrolled the paper and held it down on the tabletop to stop it curling—a curiously brutal movement, like soldiers with a prisoner.

“That’s all he had, was it?” Basso said.

The lawyer’s eyebrow nearly lifted. “Quite a substantial estate for a man of his background and antecedents. Valuing the house at seven hundred nomismata, we arrive at a total of just over six thousand.”

Basso looked down at his hands. “I spent more than that on a book once,” he said.

“No doubt it was very rare and precious,” the lawyer said briskly. “Since the general died on active service, his estate is exempt from death duties and foreign-born citizens’ capital transfer tax. Likewise, his funeral and testamentary expenses will be borne by the government.”

“They couldn’t find his body,” Basso said. “So we’re getting a bargain there.”

The lawyer couldn’t have heard, because he went on: “The general kept very precise and well-ordered household accounts, and his wants and pleasures were few. Unless there are debts we don’t know about, the liabilities to be deducted from the estate amount to something in the order of fifteen nomismata.”

“Fifteen nomismata.” Basso scowled, as though the concept of fifteen nomismata was utterly alien to him. “The hell with that,” he said, and dug his hand in his pocket. “Here’s fifteen nomismata. Pay the bills with that.”

He almost ground the coins into the table, then took his hand away. "Right," he went on, "who gets the money?"

The lawyer nodded, as though Basso had just passed a test. "There are five specific legacies, of twenty-five nomismata each, to named military welfare funds: the Army Benevolent, the Salt Fund, the Boots Fund, the Widows and Orphans and the United Disabled. A further legacy of one hundred nomismata is made to the Cazar Salt Brotherhood, as trustees, to hold and use for the relief of poverty and want among his clan resulting from the deaths and injuries of clansmen serving in the Mavortine war. I should point out that this legacy is unenforceable, since it conveys the property of a Vesani citizen to foreigners resident abroad. The government can, however, authorise payment..."

"It just has," Basso said grimly. "Go on."

The lawyer was jotting down a note in the margin, using Basso's own gold and silver pen and inkstand. Churlish to object, but he might have asked. "The balance," he said, "amounting to something in the order of five thousand, seven hundred and seventy-five nomismata, he leaves to you."

Basso didn't move. He couldn't; it even crossed his mind, for a fraction of a second, that he'd just had a stroke. Then something gave way, painfully, in his mind, and he said: "No, scrub that. Divide it up between the army funds and the clansmen."

The lawyer looked at him. He'd clearly done something very bad. "It's not as simple as that, I'm afraid," he said.

"It had better be."

"Sadly," the lawyer said (a man who knew no fear; reminded Basso of Tragazes), "it isn't. As residuary legatee you are, of course, entitled to refuse to accept the legacy. Should you do so, however, the residue—the five thousand, seven-seventy-five—devolves by intestacy to his nearest of kin; since he had no relations who are citizens, we are left with the default position, which is that the entire estate, including all the legacies, passes to the Treasury."

Basso blinked, as though he'd had a bright light shone in his eyes. "That's the law?"

"Yes."

"Fine, I'll change it."

“An admirable idea,” the lawyer said, “of which I’m sure my profession will approve. We’ve been lobbying for such a change for thirty years. However, such a change could not be made retrospective, for obvious reasons.”

Basso sighed. “All right,” he said. “If that’s the law, it’s the bloody law. I’ll just have to take the money and give it to the boot people and the rest of them myself.”

The lawyer nodded slowly, which meant awkwardness. “You certainly can do that,” he said. “However, I should point out that if you make such gifts within two years of the death of the deceased, the Treasury can, and most certainly will, apply its anti-avoidance powers and confiscate the money from you. This includes any gift made on your behalf by intermediaries, or any gift by a third party that can be shown to have been funded by you, directly or indirectly; or any loan you make to the funds in question with the intention of cancelling the debt at a later date; or any such loan where the Treasury has reason to suspect that you intend to cancel at a later date.”

“Two years,” Basso repeated. “Are you mad? The Opposition...”

“I am simply stating the law,” the lawyer said, so politely it was clear he was deeply upset; “the law which you oversee, and which you could have amended at any time during your term of office. In fact, the specific provisions relating to estates of Vesani citizens of foreign birth are drawn from your own Enfranchisement Acts. I fear,” he went on, “that you have no option but to accept the legacy with a good grace. In two years’ time, you will of course be at liberty to make whatever dispositions you may wish.”

Basso sat perfectly still for a while; then he said, “You’re a lawyer. How *do* we get round this?”

Nothing changed in the lawyer’s short, thin face. “Given your rather exceptional circumstances, I suppose it would be feasible for you to refuse to accept the residuary estate, thereby causing the entire estate to pass to the Treasury; whereupon the Treasury might be induced to make *ex gratia* grants to the funds named in the will of sums equivalent to such sums as they would have received had your original intentions been legally feasible.”

“Give the whole lot to the Treasury, and then they give it back.”

“Essentially, yes. However, such a course of action would require the exercise of political influence, which is of course outside my field of knowledge.”

“Thanks, I see.” Basso blinked and rubbed his eyes, like someone waking up from a strange dream. “I suppose we’ll do that, then. I imagine there’s a certain amount of paperwork involved.” The lawyer nodded. “No surprise there, then. Go away, do it and fetch it here for me to sign.” He frowned. “You’re sure that’s all there was,” he said. “Six thousand nomismata.”

“Quite sure.”

Later, for a while, he made sense of it by assuming Aelius must’ve sent all his money home, to support his family and his clan and probably most of his tribe as well. But that turned out not to have been the case. He’d sent home three hundred nomismata a year—considerable wealth over there, but not enough to make much of a hole in Basso’s vague, unsatisfactory sense of guilt. When the mines are running, he promised himself, and everything’s back to normal again, I’ll have to see about raising army pay, at least for the senior officers. But he knew that was a promise he wouldn’t keep; not for malice or treachery, but because in six months’ time he’d have forgotten the way he felt now, remembering only that he’d felt ashamed about something when Aelius died, and he’d made a rash promise about army pay that fortunately nobody else had witnessed.

In conclusion, he told the House, he urged them to consider two brave men; one dead and one alive, one a dedicated, experienced soldier who gave his life for the city that had adopted him, the other a young man from a privileged background who had risen to a challenge that few would have dared to face, who by his resourcefulness, courage and sheer determination had saved the army and the honour of the Republic. Two very different men; but they had one thing in common: they were Vesani citizens, equal participants along with every man, woman and child in the City in the greatest and most fascinating project the world had ever known, shareholders in the greatest enterprise in history: the Vesani Republic. He had no desire to detract in any way from the extraordinary things accomplished by his friend and his nephew; but it hadn’t been Aelius’

victory or Bassianus Licinius' victory. It had been the triumph of the Republic itself, in which every citizen had a right to share.

All that remained, he concluded, was for him to propose the motion than Bassianus Arcadius Licinius be confirmed as the new Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces of the Republic, with the rank of field marshal and the honour-name of Mavortinus.

Passed unanimously.

Basso to Bassano:

... You can, of course, be sure that nobody will ever call you that, not to your face and most certainly not behind your back. But they'll call you something, though a consensus has yet to emerge, as far as I can tell. Round-in-Circles is one I've heard in a few places; I'd be perfectly happy with that if I were you. I've also heard Golden Boy, the Fighting Toff and Camel's Balls (which I take to be a reference to your courage and fortitude). Any of them would do me. As you know, my only vanity is the wish to have a name like that for my very own: the Magnificent, the Great, the Wise, the Fortunate. Now it looks like my last, best chance is Bassano's Uncle. With which, I hasten to add, I shall be hugely content.

My first order to you in your new job is to come home as soon as you possibly can, for urgent high-level debriefing, making your formal report, intensive discussions concerning short-, medium- and long-term policy issues, and any other damn thing it takes to get you back here. And if you ever scare me like that again, I'll skin you alive.

If anything had happened to you out there, I'd never have forgiven myself. But, now it's over, I have to say how enormously, incredibly proud I am—of myself, of course, for having spotted long before anybody else just what a clever little sod you are. I venture to suggest that I saw it rather earlier than you did; I guess I've always known. You know what I'm like with reasons. I think you're the reason that explains and justifies me. I've done what I've done so you can follow on after me; and when people look back on me, in a hundred years' time, they'll say that Bassianus Severus was the necessary evil that made Bassianus Licinius possible; and that, just for once, the end absolved the means.

I've been thinking a great deal about what you wrote about sides. I'm inclined to go along with most of it, though I wouldn't go so far as to say I agree. I do firmly believe that the wrong fails and the right prevails, like they taught me to say in Temple. Experience has shown me that nine times out of ten, you can't hope to make your mind up what's wrong and what's right until the fighting's over and the winner has won; the judges' decision, in other words, is final. Ever since I read that Aelius was going into the forest, I held my breath; if we'd lost, quite apart from everything else, I'd have had to accept the decision that I'd been wrong, everything I've done's been wrong, everything I am is wrong. You know how everybody always goes on about my marvellous luck; how everything, even disasters, turns out right for me. Well, that last phrase is the key: turns out right. I don't believe in luck, never have. I believe that things happen, and the good come out of them well and the bad badly. All my life I've been waiting for the time when I come out bad; at which point I'll know, and I'll abide by the referee's decision. Till then, I know I'm right. I was right about you.

The biggest thing I ever did (we're not using good and bad, remember) was killing your father and my wife. I couldn't possibly see how any good could come out of that. I tried to make sense of it by looking out for you. To begin with, it was more guilt than anything: I may have killed his father, but I'll see to it the kid gets the best possible start in life, that sort of thing. But you grew up and I came to know you, and I realised that you were someone completely out of the ordinary; someone recognisably connected with me—we share some key qualities—but sufficiently different to make all the difference, if you follow me. By killing your father, I gave myself an opportunity to help and guide you that I wouldn't otherwise have had. And look how you've turned out, and think what you're going to do. And then I look back to what I did, all those years ago, and I can make sense of it now. Didn't turn out so bad after all.

To a certain extent, my life ended that day, when I killed them both. I lost my sister, who I loved best of all. I lost my own sons; I could never be a proper father to them, not after they'd seen me with their mother's blood on my arms and face. I lost my wife, everything human about me. Since then, apart from you, all I've had is the Bank and politics—which are both things I enjoy very much, but they're not a life; they're not people, they're not love.

Everything I've done has been for you; because of you, I might just turn out right in the end. I guess that, like you, I had to come round in a big loop to get back to the place where I was ambushed and defeated, and turn that defeat into victory.

Or something of the sort. Reading this, you will immediately conclude that I've been drinking steadily for the last three days and it's high time someone loaded me in a wheelbarrow and took me home. Actually, I suspect I'm one of the very few sober adults in the city right now. Come home, and we'll have a drink together, to celebrate.

Your loving uncle,

Basso

The messenger entrusted with this letter was the fastest and the best. He rode straight from the Severus house to the docks, where a fast sloop lay at anchor; Basso had bought four of them for the Bank's messenger corps, so they wouldn't have to rely on ordinary commercial or naval shipping. On Basso's orders, at least one of the sloops had to be ready and waiting at the Bank's private mooring at all times. Ten minutes after the messenger came on board, the sloop cast off. It was lucky enough to be able to ride out on the last gasp of a brisk south-easterly wind that had been blowing all day, and which took the sloop far enough out to catch the eastern Trade, which also happened to be blowing strong. Twenty-seven hours later, the sloop came in sight of Voroe—a record.

Experience had shown that it was quicker for the messenger to land, ride across Voroe and take a light galleass than for the sloop to pick its way through the reefs at the southern end of the island. The messenger's approach was signalled by beacons, and when he reached the northern bay, he found a twelve-oar cutter waiting to carry him across the strait to Mavortis. Once again the winds were exactly right, and an experienced captain steered the ship quickly and neatly through the complex shoals on the Mavortine side. The lookout had seen the cutter coming and recognised the Bank-messenger pennant it was flying; there was a horse ready saddled for the messenger when he disembarked. By noon he was on the main road, and two hours later he changed horses at the last fort before the forest.

Forty hours later, he was back at the City docks. Instead of coming in, the sloop held off, until a coastguard cutter came out to it. By then, the messenger was dead; but he'd had just enough time to write out a message, which the sloop's captain shouted to the coastguard officer, who wrote it down. The sloop then raised anchor and sailed out into the bay.

The coastguard couldn't leave his post, so he sent one of his subordinates to the post house on the south quay, where a Bank courier could always be found. The courier took the message to the Severus house.

Basso's letter could not be delivered. Four days after the victory, plague had broken out in the army. Apparently it was the variety that caused black swellings in the armpit. When Basso's messenger arrived at the camp, three-quarters of the army was already dead, including the commanding officer, Bassianus Licinius.

Seventeen

The indictment was read out in his absence by the special prosecutor, Gracilis Scaevola, the new leader of the Optimates. The charges were:

that he had knowingly deceived the House as to the state of the public finances;
that he had spent public money knowing the Treasury to be insolvent;
that he had abused his position for private profit;
that he had appropriated public funds for his own use;
that he had, in his capacity as First Citizen, arranged loans to the Treasury from the Bank of Charity & Social Justice at excessive rates of interest;
that he had irresponsibly and recklessly mortgaged public assets;
that he had irresponsibly and recklessly occupied the island of Voroe, knowing that such occupation was likely to provoke war with the Empire;
that he had repeatedly lied to the House about the conduct and progress of the war;
that he had misled the House concerning the threat posed by the Mavortines in order to procure the war;
that he had culpably mismanaged the affairs of the Republic, by negligence or recklessness involving the Republic in war, knowing the risks such war posed to the well-being of the Republic and its citizens.

Since he was not present, in spite of a formal summons to attend, the clerk entered a guilty plea on his behalf.

Scaevola addressed the House. It was impossible, he said, to quantify the damage Bassianus Severus had done to the Vesani people. Quite probably, the full extent of the disaster would not become apparent for some time. What they already knew was, however, quite bad enough. The field army in Mavortis had been devastated. The savages, inspired by this development to new and unparalleled heights of barbarous energy, were picking off the forts one by one, and very soon would be in a position to claim that they had driven the Vesani out of their country. The fleet—what was left of it—was pinned down in Voroe by the huge Imperial armada that had appeared off the island a matter of days after the news of the plague broke. The Empire's declared intention was to retake Voroe and then launch a punitive expedition against the City itself. Thanks to Bassianus Severus, there were no ships, no crews and no money with which to repel them, and the Republic would therefore have no option but to sue for terms. Again thanks to Bassianus Severus, there was no possibility of recruiting soldiers for the defence of the City; horrified by the fate of their countrymen, the Cazars were refusing to enlist, and the other nations from whom the Vesani had traditionally hired mercenaries were refusing to receive ambassadors, for fear of displeasing the Empire. Even if recruits could be found, there was no money to pay them with, and the whole world knew it. Quite possibly, the future of the Republic as they knew it had only a few weeks left to run. Surrender, and reincorporation into the Empire, was a distinct possibility for which the House would be advised to prepare itself. For all these miseries, one man and one man only was responsible; the man who had gambled the nation's wealth, its security, its very survival on a dream of self-aggrandisement and personal gain. The testimony of the chief cashier of the Bank of Charity & Social Justice, Tragazes, who had cooperated fully with the special investigators, was irrefutably damning. By pinning all his hopes on the Mavortine mines, Bassianus Severus had acted with a degree of blind stupidity that bewildered the mind; by concealing the extent of his insane speculations, he had converted a monstrous error of judgement into a criminal offence for which there could surely be only one penalty. Before justice could take its course, however, it was necessary that he be impeached in due form. Whether his failure to attend the House was a tacit

admission of his appalling burden of guilt or simply further evidence of the contempt with which he regarded the Republic and its people was of no consequence. No defence having been entered, the House had no option but to declare Bassianus Severus impeached and to discharge him from the office of First Citizen; further, Scaevola recommended, his passport should be impounded and he himself should be arrested without further delay, to await criminal proceedings.

Motion carried unanimously.

“You should have gone to the House,” she said.

Basso shook his head. “Not likely,” he replied, stuffing two shirts into his bag. “They wouldn’t have let me leave.”

“You’re going, then.”

“I think so, yes,” Basso replied. “Probably a good idea if I cleared out for a while.” He pulled open his desk drawer and pocketed a few things. “Is there any cash money in the house?”

“Sorry,” she said. “I just did the month’s shopping.”

“Oh.” He scowled. “How much?”

“Eight nomismata and some change.”

He sighed. “That’ll have to do, then.” She brought him the money. He put the silver in his pocket and wedged the gold into the toes of his boots. “Pity about that,” he said. “Dropping by the Bank and making a withdrawal probably wouldn’t be a good idea right now.”

“You can have my jewellery,” she said. “That must be worth a good deal.”

“Keep it,” he replied, “you’ll need it. Might be an idea to pack a bag of your own. Unless...” He paused, a shoe in each hand. “Unless you feel like coming with me.”

She frowned. “All right,” she said. “If you want me to.”

“Thanks.” He wasn’t looking at her. “In that case, grab anything you’ve got that’s gold or silver and won’t weigh you down.” He lifted his head and grinned at her. “I’ve never had to do this before,” he said. “But I know plenty of people who have. I gather the main thing is small items of great value, and keep them out of sight.”

She took a pillow off the bed, peeled off the pillowcase and started filling it with clothes, shoes and the contents of her jewellery boxes. "I really wish I'd bought you more gaudy and expensive presents," he said. "A diamond tiara or two would come in really handy right now."

"I never cared for diamonds," she replied. "How about some of your books? Aren't they rather valuable?"

Basso nodded. "But not safe to sell," he said. "My own stupid fault, for having the covers monogrammed. Could cut the covers off, I suppose, but it'd still be too risky. Besides, too bulky. Never carry anything that might slow you down if you have to run."

She'd finished filling her pillowcase. "You could stay," she said.

"What, and fight my corner?" He laughed. "No thanks. My life may have turned to shit, but I'm in no hurry to be rid of it quite yet. And if you're coming with me..." He frowned. "Anyway," he said, "that's going to have to do." He emptied his silver inkwell on the floor, wiped it out with the corner of a tablecloth and dropped it in his pocket. "Time to go," he said.

On the way out, he propped a letter on the small marble-topped table where visitors were encouraged to leave their hats and gloves. He doubted very much that it would reach his sister, but he knew he had to make the effort.

It read:

I know. I killed your husband, and now I've killed your son.

I love you more than anyone else in the world, now that Bassano's gone. I know. I've got a bloody funny way of showing it.

I have no excuses, nothing left to say except, I'm sorry. I loved him so much, and my love killed him. You were right about me all along. It'd have been so much better for everybody in the world if I'd never been born.

Basso

* * *

The guards were a problem. They still had their orders: the First Citizen wasn't supposed to leave his house without a full escort. Basso tried sending them away, gave them a direct order; the sergeant mumbled

something about the chain of command and looked away. Basso went back inside.

“How do you feel about climbing out of windows?” he asked her.

“Depends.”

He couldn’t remember if he’d told them how he’d escaped, the night Bassano went away. But he couldn’t have; straight out into the street with no problems. “Pretend we’re having an argument,” he told her. “People tend to look away when they see married couples arguing in public.”

She nodded crisply, then launched into a loud and bitter tirade about how he’d spent the rent money at the dog races. He looked away and quickened his pace; she was trotting along behind him, calling him names. As far as the people they passed were concerned, they were invisible.

In an alley off the Portway, they stopped to plan their next move. “We can forget about a ship,” Basso said. “You can bet anything you like there’ll be a crowd down at the docks, offering silly money for three square feet of deck space. We can’t afford what the captains’ll be asking.”

She nodded. “What about jewellery?” she said.

He thought for a moment. “Keep it,” he said. “This isn’t a time for extravagance.”

“So what do you propose?”

“We walk out,” Basso replied. “The Westgate, for choice. There’ll be crowds on the road we can hide in.”

“Will the gates be watched, do you think?”

He shrugged. “For all I know, I’m still First Citizen,” he replied. “Besides, they won’t be expecting me to run just yet. They assume I’ll stay and fight, since I’ve got so much to lose. Hence the need to hurry.”

“Are you sure?” she asked him. “About running, I mean. You’re assuming every man’s hand’s against you, but...”

He shook his head. “If it was just the Bank going under and the defeat, I might stick it out. But the Empire’s coming. I really don’t want to be here when they arrive.”

She nodded; fair point. “So,” she said, “once we’re out through the gate.”

He frowned. “I haven’t thought that far ahead, to be honest,” he said. “One place is pretty much like another. So long as it’s somewhere they won’t expect us to go, and where I’m not known.”

“Is there anywhere?”

“Must be,” he said. “Ready?”

There was a huge crowd in Portway Square, where all the banks had their offices—hundreds and thousands laying siege to the closed doors, and nobody even trying to restore order. It was so long since a Vesani bank had failed, nobody knew what to do any more. The general consensus seemed to be to break down the doors and get inside, but there was no method or organisation. No looting of shops as yet; at least, not in the centre of town. They couldn’t call out the Guard, of course. The City division had been sent to Mavortis, and there were only half a dozen platoons left.

“What do you think the Empire will do?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Nothing too drastic, I hope,” he replied. “I don’t think they’ll burn the place down or allow the soldiers to loot. After all, as far as they’re concerned it’s their property, they won’t want it damaged.”

“And the people?”

“Also their property. Dead men and beggars can’t pay taxes.”

At the junction of Coppermarket and Long Lane there was some kind of hold-up. The people in front of them were trying to get through, but couldn’t. Basso and Melsuntha elbowed their way to the front of the crowd, and saw that two coaches had met head-on in Coppergate, unable to pass each other because of the streams of pedestrians, and now both streets were comprehensively jammed. One of the coaches was the City mail; he recognised the other.

“My sister,” he said. “On her way to call on me, I imagine.”

Melsuntha looked at him. “She can’t have got your letter already,” she said.

“Not with all this traffic,” Basso said. “Presumably she wanted to have a final yell at me, before the guards arrive to take me away.” He shook his head. “I love her dearly, but she’s always had a fatal weakness for making scenes, and if there’s one thing I can’t be doing with, it’s melodrama.”

Melsuntha was pulling on his sleeve. “We don’t want her seeing us,” she said.

“That’s all right,” Basso replied. “She never looks out of coach windows. She gets travel-sick. Come on,” he said, “we’ll cut through the Poultry and come out on Long Lane further up.”

By the time they came in sight of the walls, the streets were hopelessly clogged with carts and wagons, all ridiculously overladen with people, furniture, sacks, crates and boxes. Children and young lads were darting along the immobilised rows, snatching anything they could reach; their victims didn't dare get down off the carts to chase them, for fear of losing their places. Nobody was making any attempt to direct or unsnarl traffic; not a guard to be seen anywhere.

"The hell with this," Basso said. "We should cut across town to the Southgate. There won't be so many people there."

But the Southgate was just as bad; Southgate Street and the Linen Yard were irrevocably clogged with carts, and the watergate was firmly shut. "This is starting to get on my nerves," Basso said. "Let's get off the street for a while and see if things calm down."

They went to the Memory of Heroes, a big inn on the outskirts of the cattle-market. It was empty, apart from a handful of the sort of men who never really left. Basso went to the bar and asked for a pint of rough cider; two bits.

"Here, I know you," said a man at the bar.

"I doubt it," Basso said, trying not to sound nervous.

"I do know you." The man was scowling horribly at him. "You're him, aren't you? The big boss."

Basso put his glass down, so his hands were free. "Think about it," he said. "If I was the First Citizen, would I be in a place like this?"

But the man's mind was made up. "You are him," he said. "I know your face, off the money. I got a bone to pick with you."

Basso tried to see over the top of his head. Luckily, the man was the sort nobody ever listened to. "All right," he said quietly. "Just for the sake of argument, I'm Bassianus Severus. What about it?"

"You owe me."

Oh well, Basso thought, and looked for an escape route, once he'd smashed the glass in the man's face. But the man was still talking.

"You don't know me, do you?"

"Sorry, no."

"I'm Bevennius," the man said. "Bevennius the barber. It was me told your General Aelius about the stolen money. Well? Remember me now?"

"Vaguely."

The man nodded firmly: vindicated, before the whole world. "I was supposed to have a pension for life," he said. "It was decreed by the government."

"I remember," Basso said. "So?"

"They won't fucking pay me," the man said furiously. "Went down the paymasters' to collect, they told me to piss off. No money left, they said, which is bullshit. Course the government's got money. But they said no, no money; if I want my pension, they said I should go and ask the bloody First Citizen. So that's what I'm doing," the man went on. "I want my money."

Basso grinned at him. "Very sorry," he said. "I can't give you anything. I'm broke."

"Bullshit."

"Believe me," Basso said, with a great big smile. "You go out in the street, you can see the queues outside the Bank. I spent my last coppers buying this drink."

The man frowned. "Is that true?"

"Yes."

"Oh. Fuck you, then," he said, and walked away.

The traffic didn't clear; if anything, it was getting worse. At noon every day, four hundred carts brought fresh vegetables into the City from the farms and market gardens outside the walls—four hundred carts trying to get in, three times as many trying to get out, and all wanting to pass under the same four archways. The crowd of people on foot who were also desperate to get out of town finally lost their patience and swarmed up onto the carts, picking their way none too lightly over the heaped-up luggage and the passengers. Basso and Melsuntha joined the stumbling, hopping stream. It took a long time.

An inbound carter asked: "What's going on?"

"The City's gone bust," Basso told him. "No money."

The carter stared at him, then past him, ignoring his existence. The City couldn't go bust; there had to be money. Basso jumped down off the cart, then helped Melsuntha. They were out. People were swirling past them, arms full of bundles and baskets. I did this, Basso thought.

They walked for an hour, by which time the crowd had thinned; then they stopped and sat under a tree. "Decided where we're going yet?" she asked him.

“Hardly matters,” he replied. “Our chances of being able to buy food within ten miles of the city are pretty slim. As for sleeping in a bed or under a roof, forget it.” He thought for a while, then said: “North, I suppose. Keep going till we’re the only ones on the road.”

“I brought some biscuits,” she said.

He raised his eyebrows. “Biscuits?”

“All I could find,” she said. “I think the servants must’ve looted the kitchen before they left.”

“Biscuits will do just fine.” He took one, then said, “We’d better ration them. God only knows when we’ll find anywhere with any food to sell.”

He looked around for the first time, interested in where he was. The country had never interested him—too few people, too few things, nothing going on. He looked back up the dusty road. In the distance, he could just make out the City, on the fold between the sea and the sky.

“Maybe I should’ve stayed,” he said.

“They’d have lynched you.”

“Yes,” he said. “But out here there’s nothing.”

“Have you decided where you’re going to go yet?”

He looked back the other way. The road was a faint grey scar on the brown hillside. To the north, there was nothing but moor for a hundred miles. Then you came to the border. Beyond that, the land rose slowly, until you came to the desert of coarse grass that stretched away practically for ever. The Hus lived there, somewhere.

“No,” he said. “Right now I’m more concerned with not being in the City, if you see what I mean.”

“I’m going east,” she said.

He looked at her. “Why?”

“I’m going home,” she said. “To Mavortis.”

That made no sense. “Why the hell should we want to go there?”

“You’re not coming with me,” she said. “You got me out of the City. Now I don’t need you any more.”

“Oh,” he said.

She was looking thoughtful, as if trying to decide what to wear for a reception. “You don’t want to go to Mavortis,” she said. “And you won’t want to go anywhere with me.”

Very rarely, Basso woke up with a headache. He reckoned it came from lying wrong in the night. Nothing could be done about it; it always went away of its own accord in the late afternoon. While it lasted, though, he was always utterly wretched, because the constant nagging pain broke his concentration and made him temporarily stupid; the worst thing he could possibly imagine was being stupid, not being able to think. That was how he felt now.

“Why not?” he said.

She lifted her head and looked straight at him. “I have a confession to make,” she said.

Confession. He frowned, trying to make sense of what he was hearing. “Well?”

She’d kicked off her shoes and was lying with her back to the tree trunk, legs stretched out in front of her. She looked like a child. “During the war,” she said, “I wanted to help my people. I found out who the leaders of the insurgency were. Turned out they’re distant relatives of ours. Of course, in Mavortis everybody’s related to everybody else, if you go back far enough.”

No sense whatsoever. “You were *spying*?”

She laughed. “I suppose so, yes. Only I really wasn’t very good at it. Nothing I could tell them was any use to them. By the time they heard it from me, they knew it already. And I did so want to help.”

He looked at her. “Why?”

“They’re my people,” she said, as if the question was too ridiculous for words. “And every time you sent more soldiers and more money, I told them and they wrote back: but what can we *do*? And I couldn’t suggest anything. Aelius was going to win, we all knew that. Even when he went into the forest, we knew he’d win. There were simply too many of you and too few of us.”

He tried to concentrate, to crack her words and pull out the meaning, but he couldn’t get a grip.

“And then there was that dispatch from Permia,” she was saying. (Permia? He groped for the name. Somewhere north-east. He’d heard the name recently.) “The outbreak of plague there. Actually, we’ve got you to thank. All that research you had done about the different types of plague and how they work. I got a copy of the report you had the doctors draw up, and I realised that the plague in Permia was the really bad sort, the one that

people catch off each other, and it spreads really quickly and kills you in a few days. Among the case histories in the report were several armies that had been wiped out by that sort of plague; armies besieging cities, mostly, or in places where they were all cooped up together. So I wrote to the leaders back home and told them to send their best men to Permia and get hold of at least a dozen people dying of the plague, and bring them back to Mavortis. Then they'd sneak into the field army's camp and leave them there." She was looking down into her cupped hands. "They didn't want to, but when Aelius went into the forest they did it; just in case Aelius won. Well, it wasn't Aelius, but that didn't matter. They couldn't get close to the camp, so they left the plague victims in a village, along with a load of corn. When the foragers from the army came to get the corn, they caught the plague and took it back with them." She shrugged. "I knew it'd work, and it did."

Basso knew the feeling. He'd felt it once before. This time, though, it made him numb. "You did that," he said. "You killed Bassano."

"I suppose so, yes," she said.

He was on his feet, though he couldn't remember having moved. Something was in his right hand, and his useless left hand was fiddling with it, his fingernails picking at the slot on the spine of the blade, for folding the blade out of the handle.

"Oh," she said, looking at him, "I see. You're going to kill your second wife as well."

Was he? He'd managed to get the blade out. He looked at the thing in his hand, the pretty slim gold-handled penknife. He'd brought it because it was worth money.

"No," he said, and tipped his hand so it fell to the ground. "There wouldn't be much point."

"Suit yourself," she said. "I was prepared for it. I wouldn't have blamed you."

He stooped slowly, picked up the knife, folded it, put it away. It was still worth money. "But why the hell did you do it?" he asked, quietly, not understanding.

"To save my country," she said.

"I didn't realise..." He shook his head. Too stupid to be able to think through the mess in his head. "I didn't think it mattered to you."

“Shows how well you know me.”

He tried to sit down, slipped, landed heavily on his backside, jarring his back. “If you’d come to me and said, don’t do this, for my sake.”

“Would you have stopped the war?”

“Of course.” Bloody stupid question. “Of course I would.”

She looked stunned, quite empty. Then she said, “It never occurred to me.”

Stupid woman, he thought. “You realise what you’ve done,” he said. “Didn’t you see the reports? They’ve got the bloody plague in the villages now. It’ll kill half your precious people.”

“I know,” she said. “But we’d rather die than be conquered.”

That was so ridiculous, so utterly stupid, it made him want to scream. But that wouldn’t help. He looked at her, and all he could see was a stupid woman. He was sick of the sight of her.

“Fine,” he said. “You go, then.”

Obediently she stood up. “If I’d asked,” she said, “would you really...?”

He didn’t answer. He wanted her to go away as quickly as possible. She’d killed Bassano; but he wasn’t angry, somehow. You can’t be angry with someone that stupid; just nauseated. “Get out of my sight,” he said.

She walked away. He didn’t look up until he was sure she’d be out of sight, in case he saw her again. When he lifted his head and looked round, there was just the road. He didn’t even know which way she’d gone.

He pulled off his boot and fished out a gold nomisma. He turned it over and looked at his face on it. Bassianus Honorius Arcadius Severus, by the grace of the Invincible Sun First Citizen of the Vesani. His head in profile, facing left; his deaf ear turned toward the viewer. Private joke. After a while he put it back and pulled his boot on.

He didn’t feel stupid any more. Nor did he have any interest in looking over his shoulder, towards the City. His sister was still there, presumably. By now, the mob would have looted his house, probably set fire to it. They’d have smashed in the doors of the Bank. He tried to remember, but Basso the Magnificent, Basso the Fortunate eluded him. Just the face on the money. He grinned.

True, his own wife had betrayed him; committed a crime so extraordinary, so bizarre, that he could barely get his mind around it. She’d done it for her side, so that they’d won, even though it meant half of them

dying in misery, pain and fear. Sides were all that mattered; Bassano had said that, so it had to be true. He thought about the picture on the beautiful yellow coin—Bassianus Severus on one side, Victory advancing left on the other side. Two sides of the same coin; and there's no such thing as good or bad luck. Things just happen.

He stood up, and he felt wonderful. He knew it wouldn't last. Fairly soon, the full weight of loss would drop on him and crush him, like a stone from a siege engine. Fairly soon, hunger and weariness would turn him into an animal. Right now, however, he was a free man, with nothing and nowhere to go, and all his enemies behind him, not knowing where he was.

He drew his sister up into his mind, and felt nothing. Also, he reminded himself, he hadn't killed his wife. The penknife had been in his hand, and he'd folded it and put it away. He felt proud, as though he'd achieved something.

A middle-aged man, deaf in one ear, useless left hand.

He walked until it was too dark to see, then lay down beside the road with his bag for a pillow. He was too hungry to sleep, and Melsuntha had taken the biscuits. He lay with his eyes open, looking at the stars. They seemed hostile, like tiny white insects. He tried to analyse the situation he found himself in, but he found he couldn't accept any of it. Really, he was still head of the Bank, First Citizen, the bewilderment and admiration of the world, and Bassano was still alive, and for some reason which he'd doubtless remember in due course he was choosing to sleep out under the stars. He watched the sky grow dark, and saw orange and red oozing out of the seams. When the dark was thin enough for him to see the road, he got up, winced at six different variations on cramp, and started to walk. His feet hurt.

He had the road to himself; nothing to be seen anywhere, not even sheep. He found a stream, leaking out of a hillside; the water was slightly brown and tasted of mud. How long, he wondered, can you keep walking without food?

When he reached the top of the hills and looked down, and saw the road below him divide north and east, he decided to go east after all. Somewhere in that direction was Auxentia. He was fairly sure the Auxentines would kill him if they realised who he was; that or lock him up and send him home, or to the Empire, so same difference. Like it mattered.

He walked all day, and mostly he thought about food, about how hungry he was, though from time to time he thought about how much his feet hurt. As the sun went down, he saw a building beside the road, a grey stone square block. One of the Bank's post-houses.

The resident was an old man, who didn't want to open the door. Basso showed him a silver coin, which changed his mind.

"There's no food," the old man said.

"Pity," Basso replied, and put the coin back in his pocket. The old man gave him a poisonous look, went into the back room and came out again with a third of a loaf of grey bread and a yellow brick that might once have been cheese.

"Do I get pickles with that?" Basso asked, but maybe the old man was deaf. Basso put the coin down on the one ancient table. The old man picked it up and put the plate down where the coin had been. That's the epitome of trade, Basso thought; really, that's all you need.

The bread was so hard it cut his mouth.

The old man wanted more money for letting him sleep on the floor. Basso grinned at him. "I haven't got any more money," he said.

"Fuck you, then," the old man said, and went out back, slamming the door behind him.

In the morning he set off again, before the old man emerged. At nightfall he came to the next post-house, but it was shuttered and the door was barred from the outside.

At noon the next day he met a man and a woman driving an empty cart. They stopped and looked at him. He asked them if they could sell him some food. They looked at each other as if he'd made an obscene suggestion. He took out his other silver coin and held it up between the forefinger and thumb of his right hand.

"We got bread," the woman said (the man scowled horribly at her). "And cheese and sausage."

Basso nodded, but didn't move his hand. "Can you give me a ride?" he asked.

"Where are you headed?" the woman asked. Basso shrugged. The man dug the woman in the side with his elbow. "Sorry," the woman said. "You want the food or not?"

His portrait in silver bought him a whole loaf of grey pumice, enough cheese to cover the palm of his hand, and eight inches of plaster-cased sausage. He thanked them. They drove on without saying anything.

He rationed the bread, a flake at a time; then he cut shavings off the cheese with his penknife; then he ate the sausage all in one go. That night it rained, and he had no shelter; he sat with his arms wrapped round his knees, and the rain crept between his collar and his neck. In the morning, he stood up and faced the road. There seemed to be just as much of it as there had been the previous day, and the day before, and the day before that. On balance, he thought, force of habit is the most compelling reason for staying alive.

In the middle of the afternoon he climbed up a hog's back and saw in the distance a cart. As he came closer, he saw it was actually a coach. The horses had been unyoked and hobbled to graze. He had six turners in copper, and the contents of his boot.

He came closer, and saw a man sitting inside the coach, with the doors shut; no sign of a driver or anybody else. He walked up and tapped on the door. The man inside was asleep, his chin on his chest. He was magnificently dressed in a purple and red gown crawling with gold thread and gold buttons. He was fat, about sixty, with thin grey hair brushed over his bald patch.

Basso knocked again. The man woke up and looked at him. "Get lost," he said.

Basso was no expert, but he had an idea the purple gown was some sort of priestly vestment. "Excuse me," Basso said. "Can you spare me some food?"

The priest scowled at him, opened his mouth, then froze. "I know you," he said.

Oh for crying out loud. "I don't think so," Basso said, trying to be pleasant.

The priest was rummaging in his copious sleeve. He found a purse, opened it and took out a coin; a gold nomisma. Basso sighed. "I get that all the time," he said. "But I'm not him, really."

But the priest was smiling; not in a nice way. "Let's see," he said (he had a strong Auxentine accent). "You look exactly like him, and those boots

must've cost two weeks' wages for a working man. Nice coat, too, except you look like you've been sleeping on a shitheap in it."

Basso shook his head. "Charity," he said. "I only beg at the very best houses."

"That's not a beggar's voice," the priest said. He looked stupid, but he didn't sound it. "You're him, aren't you?"

Basso sighed. "Tell you what," he said. "This beautiful silver inkwell for a loaf of bread. Well?"

The priest took it from him, looked at it and handed it back. "Got one," he said. "Got a whole shelf of them."

"Fine," Basso snapped. "So how'd it be if I cut your throat and helped myself?"

The priest laughed. "You can try," he said. "I wasn't always a priest. The likes of you I could have for breakfast."

Basso shrugged. "So what are you doing in the middle of nowhere with no driver?"

"You don't use your eyes, is your trouble," the priest said. "Axle's busted. Wheel's off. They've gone back to the town to get the smith and the joiner. I couldn't be arsed to walk." He reached down by his side and produced a slab of something, wrapped in vine leaves. Auxentine smoked lamb, most likely. "You are him, aren't you?"

"For what you're holding I can be anybody you like."

The priest smiled and threw him the meat; he tried to catch it left-handed, and it ended up in the dust. He brushed it off carefully. "If you're him," the priest went on, "I owe you a favour, specially if you're down on your luck."

"I'm him," Basso said.

The priest laughed. "You haven't got a fucking clue who I am, have you?"

"No."

The priest didn't seem to mind. "I'm Magnentius," he said, "cardinal of the Auxentines. You sent me a box of candied figs when I got elected."

Basso remembered. "You sat on the throne and refused to move," he said.

"That's me," Magnentius replied. "Anyhow, they were bloody good figs. I'm very partial to them, and you can't get 'em at home."

Basso laughed, as if the world suddenly made sense. “And a book,” he said. “I sent you a book.”

“Did you?” Magnentius shrugged. “I get sent a lot of books. So,” he went on, “now you know who I am.”

“I’m Bassianus Severus,” Basso replied. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Magnentius said. “What’re you doing tramping the roads looking like shit?”

So Basso told him. When he’d finished, Magnentius frowned. “You just cleared out?” he said. “Buggered off and let them win?”

“Yes,” Basso replied. “Not what you’d have done.”

“Too right,” Magnentius said. “I’d have fought the bastards, and won. Still, that’s my way. I started off working the docks, you know; I learned the hard way. Never back down, never turn your back on a friend.”

The second part, Basso reflected, could be interpreted two ways. Both equally valid. “Well,” he said, “it was a pleasure meeting you. I’d be grateful if you don’t tell anybody you’ve seen me.”

Magnentius was thinking, clearly a process that took both time and effort. “I’ll do better than that,” he said. “Listen, you must be quite handy with figures, right?”

“They wouldn’t agree back home,” Basso said. “But I can do simple arithmetic, if that’s what you mean.”

“Tell you what.” Magnentius didn’t seem aware that he’d spoken. “I’m piss-poor with figures, always have been. Can’t read or write either,” he added, with what could only have been pride. “And here’s you, smart fellow, in need of a job; and you sent me a jar of figs when you didn’t have to.” Magnentius seemed to hesitate; then he said: “Here’s what I’m saying. You come and work for me, clerking and figuring, and I’ll see you right. You’ll be safe in Auxentia, so long as nobody knows who you are.”

Basso’s turn to frown. “Just because of a jar of figs.”

“Take it or leave it,” Magnentius said. “I’ll say this, you won’t get far on your own, not on this road. Nearest town’s a day’s walk east, and they’ll cut your throat for your shoes.”

It was, Basso decided, essentially perfect. It took him all his strength of mind not to burst out laughing. “That’s very kind of you,” he said. “Thank you.”

“You’ll have to work, mind,” Magnentius said. “Hard work, long hours, and don’t expect any favours.”

“Of course,” Basso said. “Out of curiosity, though: why?”

Magnentius shrugged, and his chins shook. “I do as the fancy takes me,” he said. “Maybe it’s your lucky day.”

They came back with the smith and the joiner that evening, and worked through the night. Magnentius introduced Basso as a poor clerk, down on his luck, name of—

“Antigonus,” Basso said.

In the morning, they tacked up the horses and drove on. They were heading for the crossroads; north, to inspect the episcopal estates on the Blemmyan border. It would be a long journey, but nobody was in any hurry. Basso rode on the roof of the coach, with the porter, the guard and the cardinal’s valet.

Extras



Meet the Author

K. J. PARKER is a pseudonym. Find more about the author at
www.kjparker.com.

introducing

If you enjoyed
THE FOLDING KNIFE,
look out for

THE COMPANY

by K. J. Parker

Hoping for a better life, five war veterans colonize an abandoned island. They take with them everything they could possibly need—food, clothes, tools, weapons, even wives.

But an unanticipated discovery shatters their dream and replaces it with a very different one. The colonists feel sure that their friendship will keep them together. Only then do they begin to realize that they've brought with them rather more than they bargained for.

For one of them, it seems, has been hiding a terrible secret from the rest of the company. And when the truth begins to emerge, it soon becomes clear that the war is far from over.

When Teuche Kunessin was thirteen years old, the war came to Faralia. General Oionoisin led the Seventh Regiment down the Blue River valley, trying to catch the enemy's last remaining field army before it could get to the coast, where the fleet was waiting to take it home. With hindsight, he admitted that he sent his cavalry too far ahead; the enemy dragoons cut them off and routed them at Sherden, whereupon their commander lost his nerve and withdrew them behind the defences of the coast fort at

Greenmuir. The enemy immediately turned on General Oionoisin and, making full use of their cavalry superiority, forced him to fight a pitched battle six miles east of Faralia, on a high ridge of open moorland pasture. The Seventh fought well, holding off the dragoons for over an hour before their square finally broke. Once the pike wall was disrupted, however, the enemy infantry moved against them and their annihilation was inevitable. After the battle, in the absence of any effective opposition in the west, the enemy retraced their steps as far as Meshway, defeated General Houneka's Fifth Regiment and laid siege to the city. Most authorities now agree that Oionoisin's error of judgement at Faralia prolonged the war by ten years.

Teuche's father knew the soldiers were somewhere in the parish. He'd met Tolly Epersen as he was driving the herd back to the sheds for evening milking, and Tolly reckoned he'd seen them, a dark grey blur on the slopes of Farmoor. Teuche's father was worried, naturally enough. His sheep were on Big Moor, a hopelessly tempting prize for a large body of hungry men. He considered the risks and options: if Tolly had seen them on Farmoor an hour ago, even if they were coming straight down the combe, it'd still take them four hours to reach the pasture where the sheep were. There should be plenty of time, therefore, to get up to Big Moor and drive the flock into Redwater combe, where with any luck they wouldn't be noticed. Normally he'd have gone himself and left the milking to Teuche, but as luck would have it, he'd put his foot in a rabbit hole and turned over his ankle two days earlier, and was still limping badly. He didn't like the thought of sending the boy out where there might be stray soldiers, but he couldn't risk anything happening to the sheep. He called Teuche out of the barn, where he'd been mending hurdles, and told him what to do.

Teuche clearly wasn't wild about the idea, but he could see that it had to be done, and that his father was in no fit state to do it. He whistled up the dogs, put some rope in his pocket just in case he did meet any soldiers (if the dogs ran ahead, they'd give him away; once he got up on the top he'd put them on the lead, just in case) and set off up the course of the dried-up stream. It wasn't the shortest way, but he figured he could keep out of sight behind the high banks on that side, if there turned out to be soldiers on the moor.

The stream bed ran down the steepest side of the hill, but Teuche was young, fit and in a hurry. Because he was keeping well over to the lower side, in the shade of the ninety-year-old copper beeches his great-grandfather had planted along the top of the bank to act as a windbreak, he could neither see nor be seen, and the wind in the branches made enough noise to mask any sound he made, though of course going quietly had long since been second nature to him. It took him no more than an hour to reach the gate in the bank that led from Pit Mead into Big Moor. There he paused, pulled himself together, and peered over the gate to see what he could see.

To begin with, he had no idea what they could be. They were far too dark to be sheep, too big to be rooks or crows. If he'd been a stranger to the neighbourhood he might well have taken them for rocks and large stones; not an unusual sight on the top of the moor, where the soil was so thin and the wind scoured more of it away every year. But, thanks to his great-grandfather's windbreak, Big Moor was good pasture with relatively deep, firm soil; there were one or two outcrops down on the southern side, but none at all in the middle, and these things, whatever they were, were everywhere. His best guess was that they were some kind of very large birds; geese, perhaps.

At first, they only puzzled him; he was too preoccupied by what wasn't there, namely the sheep. He curbed the impulse to run out into the field and look for them. If they weren't there, it might well mean that the soldiers had got there first and were down out of sight in the dip on the eastern side. By the same token, the sheep might be down there too, though they only tended to crowd in down there when they needed to shelter from the rain. He couldn't decide what to do for the best, and as he tried to make up his mind, he considered the unidentified things scattered all over the field; not sheep or rooks, not stones, and there had to be hundreds of them. Thousands.

He stayed in the gateway for a long while, until he realised that time was getting on, and he still didn't know where the sheep were. Very cautiously, he climbed the gate and dropped down as close as he could to the bank, where he'd be harder to see. His idea was to work his way along the bank as far as the boggy patch, where he could use the cover of the reeds to get far enough out into the field to spy down into the hidden dip. It was a good plan of action. In spite of his anxiety, he felt moderately proud of himself for keeping his head in a difficult situation.

The first one he found was lying in the bottom of the narrow drainage rhine that went under the bank about a hundred yards down from the gate. Because of the clumps of couch grass that edged the rhine, he didn't see him until he was no more than five feet away. He stopped dead, as though he'd walked into a wall in the dark.

The man was lying on his face, his arms by his sides, and Teuche's first thought was that he was drunk; passed out and sleeping it off in a ditch, like old Hetori Laon from Blueside. He noticed that the man had what looked like a steel shell that covered his top half, from his neck down to his waist, and under that a shirt apparently made out of thousands of small, linked steel rings. Then he realised that the man's face was submerged in the black, filthy water that ran in the rhine. He ran forward to see if he could help, but stopped before he got much closer.

He'd never seen a dead man before. When Grandfather died, his mother had made him stay out in the barn; when he was allowed back inside there was no body to be seen, just a long plank box with the lid already nailed down. Maybe as a result of that, he'd always imagined that a dead body would be a horrifying, scary sight; in the event, it was no such thing. It looked just like a man lying down—a man lying down drunk, even, which was comedy, not tragedy—but he could tell just by looking at it that it wasn't human any more, it wasn't a person, just a thing. Teuche wasn't afraid of things. He went closer.

He knew the man must be a soldier, because of the steel shell and the ring shirt. From the available facts, he worked out a theory. The soldier had been drinking; he'd wandered away from the rest of the army, fallen asleep sitting against the bank, somehow slid over and ended up face down in the rhine, where he'd drowned without ever waking up. It struck him as a sad thing to have happened, sad and stupid but understandable. Something of the sort had happened to a tinker last year out over Spessi, and the general opinion had been that it had served him right.

But he didn't have time for any of that now, he reminded himself; he had to find the sheep and get them down into the combe. It occurred to him that the soldier's friends might be out looking for him, so he carried on down the bank towards the reeds, keeping his head below the skyline. He'd nearly reached the outskirts of the wet patch when he made the connection

in his mind, between the dead man and the things he'd seen lying in the field.

Once the idea had occurred to him, he felt stunned, as though he'd just stood up under a low branch and cracked his head. If the grey things lying in the field were all dead men... but that couldn't be possible, because several thousand human beings don't just suddenly die like that, all together at the same time, out in the open fields.

But, he thought, they do, if they're soldiers, in a war. That's precisely what happens. He knew all about the war, and wars in general. He'd always liked hearing stories, both the old ones about the heroes of long ago, and the more up-to-date ones about how our lads were slaughtering thousands of the enemy every day, in victory after victory. It was almost impossible to believe, but maybe that was what had happened right here, on Big Moor; General Oionoisin had managed to catch up with the enemy and cut them to pieces, right here, on our top pasture...

He tried to think about the sheep, but he couldn't. He wanted to go further out into the field, to look at the bodies, but he couldn't bring himself to do it, in case some of them were still alive, wounded, dying. Shouldn't he try and do something for them, in that case? But the thought made him feel sick and terrified; the last thing he wanted to do was actually go near them, dying, as if fatal injury was something contagious you could pick up by touch. Nevertheless, he crept out from the fringe of the reed bed and walked quickly and nervously, as though he was trespassing, up the slope towards a clump of the things clustered round a gorse bush.

There were five of them. They all had the same steel shells and shirts; one of them had a steel hat, with ear flaps. It hadn't done him much good: there was a wide red gash in his neck, through the windpipe. The blood was beginning to cake and blacken, and the last of the summer's flies were crawling in it, weaving patterns with their bodies. The man's eyes were wide open—he had a rather gormless expression, as if someone had asked him a perfectly simple question and he didn't know the answer. There was another gash on his knee. His right hand was still clutching a long wooden pole, splintered in the middle. The other four men were face down, lying in patches of brown, sticky blood. Teuche noticed that the soles of their boots were worn almost through. A little further on, he saw a dead horse, with a man's body trapped under it. There was something very wrong about it, but

it took him quite some time to realise that the body had no head. He looked round for it but he couldn't see it anywhere.

He tried to think what he should do. His first duty was to see if there was anybody he could help; but there were so many of them, and besides, what could he do? Suppose there were two or three, or five or six or ten or twenty or a hundred men lying here still alive, capable of being saved, if only someone came to help them. That made it too difficult. One man, one stranger, and he'd feel obliged to get him down the hill, somehow or other, back to the house, where Mother and the other women would know what to do. Just possibly he could manage one, but not two; and if there were two, or more than two, how the hell was he supposed to know how to choose between them? Besides, he told himself, these people are the enemy. They came here to kill and rob us and take our land. They deserved it. More to the point, he had to find the sheep.

He reverted to his original plan of action, though he knew it had been largely overtaken by events: down to the dip, where he found no live enemy soldiers and no sheep. That more or less exhausted his reserve of ideas, and he felt too dazed and stupid to think what to do next. After a minute or so wasted in dithering, he climbed up on the bank beside the southern gateway, where he knew he could get a good view of the whole of the river valley, from Stoneyard down to Quarry Pit. Of course, that wasn't Kunessin land; it belonged to the Gaeons, Kudei's family, but he knew they wouldn't mind if he went on to it to get his sheep back.

But there were no sheep; no white dots, only a scattering of the grey ones, stretching down the valley until they were too small to make out. That's it, then, he thought: the sheep have gone, the soldiers must've taken them after all. He knew without having to think about it that that was really bad, about as bad as it could possibly get. He tried to feel angry—bastard enemy coming here, stealing our sheep—but he couldn't. After all, the enemy had been punished enough, General Oionoisin had seen to that, and what good had it done? Thirty-five acres of dead meat wouldn't make up for losing the sheep. Then he told himself that the government would probably pay compensation, sooner or later; it stood to reason that they must, because otherwise it wouldn't be fair. You can't have armies come on to your land and kill thousands of people and steal a valuable flock of sheep

and not expect to pay for it. The world wouldn't work if people could behave like that.